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The Adventurers

H. B. Marriott Watson

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Mrs. Charles E. Robbins
8 Stewart Avenue
Monson, Massachusetts



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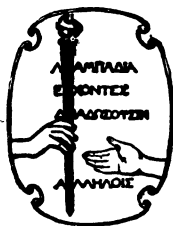
HE DREW THE MAN FROM UNDER THE PORTCULLIS

The Adventurers

A Tale of Treasure Trove

By
H. B. Marriott Watson

With Illustrations by
A. I. Keller



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THE ADVENTURERS

CHAPTER I

I HEAR OF IVOR CASTLE

It seems odd to me, after this interval of years, that the mere chance of that idle excursion into the west should have been the prelude of so remarkable an experience as befell me later. But for the whim that sent me wandering afield in the tail of a summer of particular heat and discomfort in the town, these strange adventures had not ensued, and I should have compassed the common lot of common lives about me, denoted and picked out in no way more than any other inmate of this nineteenth century. The discrepancy of my narrative with the period in history, the Victorian suavity, and the humdrum character of daily events, have sometimes since prevailed upon me in the compilation; and I feel, even now, upon the threshold of my story, constrained, as it were, to an apology for its anachronism. But the events have been too real and vivid to myself for me to harbor any doubt; and the dark face of Captain Sercombe, and that smoother, blacker one of Hood, return upon my memory with indelible clearness.

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It was in the August of the year 188- that I turned the corner, as it were, into the strange history I am now to relate. The Welsh Marches had been entirely unknown to me, until at a point in the idle tour of which I have spoken I fell upon the little town of Raymond, and brought up at seven in the evening at the "Swan" hostelry, that occupies a corner of the irregular triangle constituting the market-place. The country in that part is full of swelling hills and valleys, soft and exhilarating of air, and clothed with a great vesture of wood. The great Gwent, as the forest across the little river Ray is called in the country-side, rolls westward across the county, broken by tracts of fertile fields lying under grain and pasture, and descends upon the black hills of the mining district beyond. At Raymond, which stands upon the hither side of the river, we are yet in England proper, and upon the margin of a more open country. The town itself is small and neat, and wears its air of respectable antiquity very haughtily. It was in former times the farthest English settlement, and lived, if one may judge by guide-books, in a certain fear of its troublous neighbors. Across the stream, and scattered in the ruder regions beyond, were the tenements and fortifications of the Lords of the Marches, those temerarious and turbulent nobles to whom the kings of England granted high privileges, and even a virtual sovereignty, in return for their custody of the border.

The inn, which was itself among the most venerable buildings in the small town, was comfortably served by a very brisk landlord of middle age. It had kept, so to speak, a precarious continuity with antiquity, and in the main scheme had changed but little during the three hundred years which had passed since its erection. In particulars, no doubt,

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the marks of history were scored upon its face. A window here, and there a door, dating from various periods, preserved the tale of its vicissitudes. The entrance lay through an arch of the house, by which even a coach and four horses might find access to the court-yard within, and that interior space was surrounded by the rambling storeys, constructed in part of cobble and in part of stone, with two tiers of balconies abutting on the yard. The hostelry was much too large for its present uses, but for all that wore no air of neglect in the inhabited chambers. My own rooms were marked by homely comfort, and I was waited upon like a prince of the blood. It seemed that there were few visitors to Raymond in these times, and a prudent host would make every disposition for the entertainment of a traveller. After a rude and wholesome country dinner I sought distraction in the tap-room with my pipe and a heterogeneous company of towns-folk. The landlord was in some kind a president at this symposium, which consisted for the main part of a few of the smaller shop-keepers. There was Mr. Jones, for example, whose name I had noticed upon a shop-front as I rode through the High Street. This man, who was very sleek and dark, and was turned thirty, fixed upon me early in the evening, and poured his confidences into my ear. He was a hay merchant, and he had no dearer ambition than to establish his business in Bristol. He found Raymond too mean for his aspiring temper, and the Mecca of his prayers was Bristol. All this he delivered in an unpleasant voice with a whine in it, on the high pitch that characterizes the Welsh, but I confess that I found him something of a bore, and was glad to exchange commonplaces with my other neighbor. The landlord himself kept his seat before the long table, smoking his long pipe with the

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peace of a man whose business is ended for the day, and now and then discharging a glance in my direction. He was, I discovered, a travelled man for those parts, and had the reputation of a smart fellow. Indeed, he compared well with the duller rustics who surrounded him. The placid air of the tap-room was in some ways little more diverting than the solitude of my chamber, but that was soon to pass. Presently there came a great noise, followed by a heavy tramp of feet approaching from the outer bar, and in strutted a tall young fellow, with his hat upon one side, and a jaunty air of one who knows his own worth and despises his neighbors.

"Come in," says the innkeeper, very friendly, but with a certain air of constraint. "Plenty of room, Mr. Montgomery, sir, and a good-evening to you."

"Oh, hang your ceremonies!" says the new-comer, but with no touch of ill-humor; "and give your best attention to my order, Wendover." And clapping his hat more firmly on his head, he rapped loudly upon the table.

He drank the glass of whiskey which the bar-man served, and then fell into a seat, and stared without any truculence, but rather with a savage air of curiosity, at myself. He was of a ruddy color and quite young, and something in his bearing rather than in his dress marked him out from the rest of the company. But above all, his great size and muscular appearance were noticeable.

"Who is that?" I asked of my peevish neighbor, as soon as Montgomery's eyes had wandered from me.

The hay-merchant looked contemptuous. "He's no better than he should be," he answered; "for all his grand airs he's but little better than a pauper. And that's where your blood comes to in the end."

The landlord, who was close by me, noting my in-

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terrogation with a busy eye, leaned forward and supplemented this disparaging information in a whisper:

"One of the best families in the Gwent, sir," he murmured, "though his estate is no more than a yeoman's nowadays. Times are against property on the border;" and having delivered this statement he drew himself back and addressed a question to Montgomery, with the object, as I conceived, of exhibiting a local celebrity to his guest.

"Anything doing out your way, sir?" he inquired.

The youth turned his eyes upon him in a lack-lustre gaze, and then, emptying his glass, hammered on the table noisily.

"Why the deuce don't that man of yours come?" he exclaimed. "Here have I ridden in ten miles for the sight of a human face and the taste of good Scotch, and— That's right." He gave his order, and observing Wendover again, gave vent to a heavy laugh. "What do you expect to happen in the Gwent?" he asked. "It's as dull as ditch-water."

"I don't know so much about that," put in suddenly a man on the other side of the room, whom from his general air I took to be a miller. He rolled back in his arm-chair, smoking a long pipe. "There's something as I heard of lately that was pretty exciting."

The spokesman drew all eyes upon him. The surface of our deep composure stirred and ruffled.

"What's that, Mr. Llewellyn?" asked the inn-keeper.

Montgomery looked incredulous. "Pooh!" he said, disdainfully.

The miller enjoyed the importance, and seemed inclined to prolong it. He leisurely refilled his pipe.

"I heard something queer happened at the castle last week," he said, at last, seeing that his news must

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out. With some skill he could have held us longer in suspense ; but he had no wit save to break it too sharply and too briefly. Still, the company kept the air of attention.

"What's that?" asked Montgomery.

"A girl that was in service there told my missus," went on the miller. "We've taken her in. She's left the castle."

"What did she say?" asked Wendover.

"I don't exactly recall the right of it," the miller confessed, with a hasty sense of shame. Montgomery looked at me, and seeing a smile in my eye, burst out laughing. "But I know it was about a burglary," said the miller, promptly, and with courage. He defied us with his eye. That word convicted us ; we laughed no more.

"I'd like to hear about the burglary," said some one.

"The man that keeps the inn there—the—what's that inn?" went on the miller.

"The Woodman," answered Montgomery.

"Aye, that's it. He was servant to the castle—the girl said—and he caught them."

"Caught whom?" said Montgomery, impatiently.

"Well, he didn't catch them," admitted the miller, "but he frightened them off. They were after the plate that the old gentleman keeps, so the man told my girl."

"He's a queer old customer," interposed one of the company, seeing, as we all saw, that we should get no further interest out of the miller. Our attention broke up.

"You're right," nodded his *vis-à-vis*, and replaced his pipe in his mouth.

"May I ask what castle you are speaking of?" I ventured to say, addressing the miller.

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"Ivor Castle, sir," said he, civilly.

"It lays in the Gwent, sir, back of the hills," explained the landlord.

"He's a rum old chap," repeated the man upon the farther side, as if the remark comforted him.

"As you talk of this burglary," said Montgomery, breaking in rather rudely, "I'd like first to know what they were going to find in the castle. Every one knows there's nothing to be got there."

Confronted with this uncivil infidel, the miller came to bay. "I don't know anything about it," he declared; "all I know is that this young woman—she says she was woke up by a noise going on, and then she went to sleep again, putting her head under the blankets, and that the man-servant—I can't bring back his name—*he* told her next day that the thieves had tried to get in."

"Humph!" sneered Montgomery, who had plainly drunk too much to be an easy companion. "I don't call that much of a tale."

"If it's true, it's true," said the mild-looking man, who evidently felt that his neighbor was being hardly used.

"Who the devil asked your opinion?" retorted the lad, brusquely. The mild man shifted in his chair, but mustered courage to ask if a man might not express his sentiments upon a point of general interest.

"That's true, anyway," assented Montgomery, with a foolish laugh.

It was clear that he had taken enough to be quarrelsome if the opportunity should arise, and unfortunately he chose to turn his bantering gaze upon my sour and peevish neighbor.

"Well, Mr. Jones," said he, "and how's hay?"

"How's crops, my young gentleman?" says Jones, in his surly fashion.

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"Crops !" said Montgomery, in a bawl—"crops is as they should be—seasonable. Here's to crops, gentlemen, and also to hay," and he fell into his chair laughing abominably. But suddenly, and upon no further provocation, unless it was the whiskey (which was very likely), he jumped to his feet, and stared poor Jones insolently in the face. "And what the devil are my crops to you ?" says he.

I could not say if this was part of an elaborate jest, conceived by a maudlin brain, or whether he had really been taken with an unreasonable fit of anger. But, whether of accident or of purpose, he filled up his glass forward between his fingers, and the dregs flew out and spattered the hay-merchant's face.

"Gentlemen !" cried the landlord, in some alarm.

Montgomery stood, his red face somewhat vacant and grinning broadly, while his sallow-faced victim, who had got upon his feet, gesticulated and stuttered under his nose with a show of passion that was not quite English. And at this moment, when it seemed as if some retaliation was to be expected and a fracas precipitated, an impulse took me, and I myself intervened.

"I think, sir," said I, addressing Montgomery, "you will admit that you have used this worthy gentleman very ill ; and if I were you, sir, with your youth and spirit at my back, I would ask his pardon at once."

On that he stared at me for some seconds, and then, plumping the empty glass on the table, he broke into a sheepish laugh.

"All right," he said ; "very sorry. I beg his pardon," and muttering some indistinct apologies, he resumed his seat, sitting somewhat silent for a good time afterwards.

But that was my introduction to the lad, an introduction none too favorable, of which he began at once



" 'WHO ASKED FOR YOUR OPINION?' RETORTED THE LAD "

I HEAR OF IVOR CASTLE

to make use. For he crept close to me, moving from chair to chair, when a chance served him, and, being emboldened by the liquor he had drunk, struck up a lively conversation with me. In the end he was exceedingly merry, and was shaking me heartily by the hand, and invited me to drive out to his farm in the Gwent with a good deal of unusual warmth and vehemence. But I managed at last to make my escape, and that without giving him offence.

It was yet early, but the tap-room had lost its humors for me, and I was for bed. In my room I spent an agreeable hour, idly considering my guide-books, and determining a date for my return to town. Upon the map I made out the site of Ivor Castle, of which there had been talk, as also of Montgomery's farm, which he had described to me. They both lay in the Gwent, as that great reach of forest in the Marches is called. But I had formed no definite plans for the next day when I fell asleep, which I did amid the noise of voices and a sound of rude singing from the court-yard below, where Montgomery and the aristocracy of the tap-room were issuing into the night. The very last sound of which I was conscious was the rattling of horses' hoofs upon the stone yard.

CHAPTER II

I ACCEPT AN ODD INVITATION

RAIN had fallen in the night, and a sweet savor of earth commingled with the summer air when I opened my door and looked forth upon the court-yard. The landlord gently deprecated the events the previous evening, offering, as it might be to a fastidious guest, an apology for a headstrong young scapegrace.

"They're not like us of the eastern counties, sir," says he. "They're a bit Welsh hereabout. It's a contamination, to my way of thinking. But there—all sorts of blood go to make a nation, and that's the truth."

But he volunteered a few additional particulars about Montgomery.

"Not a bad sort, sir, at heart, but he's running to seed here. He's taken a main fancy to you; that I could spy at a look. But it's a poor prospect for him, with land dwindling away to nothing; and Llanthony is a shabby house for a young gentleman as he should be."

Llanthony, it appears, was the name of Montgomery's paternal estate in the Gwent. And, in fact, it was for this Gwent that I was bound this morning. The prospect of those rolling hills attracted me with some force. I had an appetite for the wilderness of that back country, unscarred, as I learned, by the track of any railway. It was in a way virgin, at the least a property private from the world. And in the forenoon

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the wind blew briskly with a scent of romance in its breath. To affront it and breast it brought back the temper of the spring, though the woods were hung in the full leafage of summer. It struck my face with a fresh languor, inimitable to describe, too elusive to define. The mood of high romance enveloped one that rode in such a fairy atmosphere. As I struck across the Ray and directed my horse towards the long red slope of the ascent, I looked back upon the little town and discovered it wrapped in mountain humors. It made a pretty picture, with its Old-World airs, and I jogged along with a very lively sense of satisfaction.

Llanthony, according to my host, lay at the back of the first hill, some four miles from Raymond, but as the estate was not my particular aim, and, if it had been, I had no one to guide me, I roamed indefinitely through by-ways over a circuit of the upper Gwent, and finally drew up in the village of Llanellan about the hour of lunch. This village lay a mile or so from the more open districts of the Gwent, and within the privy borders of the great forest itself. The recesses of that ample magnitude of trees impressed themselves upon the imagination. The interminable ascents and descents, the abundant streams, the deep glades and ancient growths of wood—all these were confluent towards a stimulation of the fancy. It would have been easy to throw the reins upon the horse's neck and to wander, lost in the abysms of that wilderness. For the villages were scattered at a great distance, and the habitations of the settlers were at long intervals. It was somewhere about five in the afternoon, and as I rode down into a spacious valley a few miles from Llanellan, that the monotony of this desultory journey was broken by an event of some moment.

A pretty brook rippled through the wood, and was crossed upon a rude bridge. As it chanced, my horse

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fell suddenly lame, and I had dismounted on the farther edge of the stream to examine his hoof, when I heard sounds as of a struggle in the close brake to my left, and upon that a shrill shout as of one crying for assistance. Leaving the bay without further ado (for he was of mild mettle), I jumped into the copse and ran towards the noises, shouting as I went to encourage the wayfarer who was calling for aid.

The cries had already ceased, but a crackling and brushing in the undergrowth still directed me, and bursting through the furze and brier, I came out very suddenly upon the verge of the little brook, and almost fell over the form of a man who lay doubled upon the earth. As I stumbled and shifted to regain my balance, I had a glimpse of a lithe, lean-bodied fellow vanishing precipitately into the copse. But, obviously, it was to the victim that I must first turn my mind, rather than to any fugitive assailant. He was a man, as I guessed, of some sixty years or more, very bald of the head, and under the middle stature. Across his white and shining forehead was a streak of blood, which drew from me an exclamation as I helped him to his feet.

"It is not mine," said he, with a complacent smile. "I go better prepared than my years would suggest."

"No bones broken?" I inquired.

He shook his head, leaning upon my arm and breathing painfully.

"A bruise or two, and no wind in my belly—no more. I was a fool to have forgotten my pistol."

The words recalled me to the thought of the runaway, to whom I attributed this scurvy attack upon an old gentleman.

"What was the cause?" I asked. "Some highway thief."

"Hardly that," he remarked, thoughtfully, and pull-

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ing forth an ancient snuffbox with deliberation. "No, I could scarcely describe him as that."

I made a motion to withdraw, recollecting hastily that it was my duty to ascertain some tidings of the ruffian. But the old gentleman, observing my intention, put his hand upon my shoulder.

"I would not worry," said he, suavely. "It is of small consequence as it happens. Now had you come up a moment later," he continued, regarding me with a faint smile, "I could hardly have put a limit on this business. But as it is—"

"Surely," I broke in, shortly, "you will have the brute arrested if you can recognize him again?"

"Recognize him?" murmured the old gentleman, snuffing gently and with an air of consideration from his fingers. "Yes, I dare say I should know him. But I am sure you will allow me to manage this affair my own way. I have stood the racket, you know, though I heartily acknowledge you have acquired a certain claim to attention. It is very good of you," he said, politely. And then, "Yes, I think I should know him again—if we met—which is, of course, extremely improbable," he concluded, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Now the self-possession of this old fellow, with his air of imperturbable courage, puzzled me hugely, and, in a manner, was very disconcerting. He had taken the outrage, which had evidently been committed upon his person, with such mildness, even with amiability. I could scarce credit my senses to see him discoursing there, with his snuff between his fingers, so pleasantly and broadly, of the event. He seemed quite unruffled, though his body still panted with the efforts of his struggle.

"Is your watch safe? I suppose it was robbery?" I said, feeling somehow rather mean and cast down by the unexpected situation.

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"Thank you, quite safe," he replied, without troubling to ascertain. "Yes, quite safe. Certainly I must suppose it to have been robbery. Yes, robbery, no doubt."

His air was so abstracted that I took leave to doubt his sanity, but, after all, it was no business of mine if he was foolishly disposed to mercy ; and one needs but little imagination to conceive of a dozen deep reasons for an assault save the plain motive of theft. He turned to me presently as I was upon the point of withdrawing.

"I feel I owe you an explanation, sir," he said, politely. "But first—your legs and arms are younger than mine—I see my hat has taken refuge from violence in the brook, and now, that the danger is past, I fear the water will do it no particular good."

I bent across the stream and raked the hat towards me. It was somewhat battered in the conflict, which improved its appearance the less that it had in any case known many years, and was, indeed, the tall hat of a previous generation. He made me his thanks, and taking my arm, moved slowly and with an air of difficulty out of the brake.

"I am at a loss to know," said he, laboring over his words, and speaking very deliberately, "what Devil of Folly pursues men that they will hazard all on a piece of carelessness, a wanton whim, or just mere indifference or idleness. I cannot say"—he paused as we emerged upon the road. "This must be your horse then? A good serviceable animal, that would have warmed my heart thirty years since. I cannot say"—he resumed, clutching gently at my arm—"that my adventure to-day was due to any other cause than that of mere carelessness." He paused again, surveying my horse with apparent interest. "In the first place, I should not have been so far from home ; secondly,

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I should not have been without my revolver ; thirdly, I should have used my stick harder when I got home—a concurrence of negligences which made my fate almost a certainty—but for your arrival," he added, as a polite afterthought, squeezing my arm.

I confess that I was utterly at a loss what to make of him, and was inclined to interpret him for a mild lunatic, but we proceeded along the roadway, I with the bridle of my horse over my arm. He still clung to me, discoursing quietly in a melodious voice upon his views of life and the philosophy we should derive from it, while I listened, for the most part, in silence. But after walking for a quarter of an hour, the latter part of which time was spent in a somewhat laborious ascent, we came out upon the summit of a little hill clad in the splendid livery of summer, and surmounted by what seemed in the distance to be the ruins of a castle. Here the old gentleman came to a halt, ceasing simultaneously of his chatter, and looked towards the building.

"I am fully conscious, Mr. —; I don't think I caught your name, Mr. —"

"Greatorex," I told him.

"Thank you," said he. "I am fully conscious, Mr. Greatorex, that I am under a deep obligation to you for your great service this afternoon. Greatorex ! There are, if I remember aright, Greatorexes in Hampshire."

I explained that we were cadets of that family. He bowed his acknowledgments of my explanation, and proceeded.

"Hospitality tells me that I can do no less than offer you the opportunity of refreshment for yourself or"—his eyes dwelt abstractedly upon my horse—"for your animal. But I am reluctant to press the offer upon you, seeing that it is very probable you have

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ridden far"—he was observing poor Jupiter's flanks—"and are still far from your destination."

His eyes interrogated me, but with no rude curiosity, rather as if they offered a remark, which I might consider a question or not, as I chose. I answered, frankly.

"I am staying at the Swan, in Raymond, and to say truly"—I laughed—"I am not quite sure how far I am from the town, nor in what direction it lies."

"In that case," he said, urbanely, but with a sense of satisfaction, as I imagined, "my reluctance vanishes. You are some seven miles from Raymond, and my house is here."

Without more ado we resumed our walk, and entering an avenue of limes, came next upon an iron gateway set in a high brick wall. It was of very ancient workmanship, but as nothing to the house itself, which came directly into full view, so soon as we had passed the entrance. It lay some three hundred yards back, approached through a patch of park, grown with grass, and interspersed with noble trees. My first impression had not been wrong. It was nothing less than the ruins of a small castle—one of those fortalices reared by the border barons against the inroads of Welsh barbarians in the Plantagenet times. As we drew near my gaze devoured the building, and took in many points of interest. It was quite small, but, saving for one wing, in perfect integrity. From the huge masonry of the drum-towers down to the moat and portcullis all was as it had been in the days, maybe, of Hugh Lupus. The wing of the quadrangle to our left was dismantled, and lay strewn with huge stones in precarious ruin. That alone was wanting to make the illusion of the Middle Ages complete. A hundred yards or so upon the other side, however, gleamed the red roof and heavy thatch of farm-build-

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ings, and a round stack or two in the neighborhood proved that the fortress kept its ancient uses no longer.

"You will see that I am able to resist a siege," said my host, with a whimsical smile, as we crossed the drawbridge, adding, with what seemed to me a comical irony, and looking down at the bridge, "I fear, though, we should find some trouble with the hinges."

We passed through the arch of masonry and into the court-yard within, where the old gentleman speedily summoned a man and gave him charge of my horse. And here again I noticed that further appearances testified to the use of the castle as a farm; for though the court-yard was rudely paved with the original stones, the masonry of the walls was hung with ivy, prettily covered with many creepers. It was altogether a charming scene. From a scrutiny of this pleasant aspect I was aroused by my host, who, pausing as he pushed open a huge oaken door, turned to me suddenly.

"I am extremely remiss, Mr. Greatorex," he exclaimed, with a gesture of apology. "You have not yet the style of your grateful host. My name is Kesteven, and this is generally known as Ivor Castle."

All this was conceived in the most formal and eccentric temper, and doubtless had it not been for the strange interest of his habit and conduct I might not have consented so meekly to be his guest; for it was now time for my homeward journey. However, I must, it appeared, sit and drink with him a glass of sherry in his library, a large and ancient room with a very fine display of oaken shelves and panelling.

"This," said he, "is a wine for philosophers, Mr. Greatorex. I will have no controversy upon the point," he said, with a pleasant air of authority, and shaking his finger at me. "I agree that I am out of

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date. It is true I have no stomach for port, and no palate for your sparkling meretricious juices. Claret savors either very sourly, or of a perfumer's shop. As for spirits, they are but drugs at the best. But give me a fine, full-flavored glass of sherry, the ancient sack. Falstaff drank bottles of it a day; I," his eyes lingered on the decanter, "I do what I can. Another glass, Mr. Greatorex?"

I excused myself, and rose for departure. For a minute or two he appeared to have fallen into abstraction; and then, glancing at me quickly, he regarded me with a steadfast, inquiring gaze.

"Mr. Greatorex," said he, "you are a young man. I begin to think that we should find much in common, unless it may be our taste in wines. You will permit the question? Are you married?"

I assured him that I was not. He nodded, as if this were satisfactory news. "Nor am I," he answered, "but very probably for another reason. I cannot expect you to take part in my philosophy. But I am reminded that you have seen nothing of a house which is of some historical interest, and which I should esteem myself happy to show you. Is it necessary that you should return to your Swan this evening?"

The invitation in the query took me aback, for, eccentric as my host undoubtedly was, I had not anticipated this proffer of hospitality. Yet there was certainly no pressing reason for my return, and here, at least, I should have more congenial company than in my miscellaneous tap-room. I replied something to the effect of this thought.

"Good!" said he, brightening a little. "You are kind to cheer a solitary. I can even promise you a bottle of champagne if you are young enough. If you will allow me, I will call my houskeeper." He rose

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and went to the bell, but, pausing with his hand upon the rope, looked at me gravely.

"I should be doing you wrong, Mr. Greatorex," he said, "if I were not to let you know that by consenting to be my guest to-night you are conferring upon me a great favor. You place me under a particular obligation."

I told him, laughing, that the obligation was mine.

"No," said he; "I fear that my meaning is not plain. Let me say this: I have a particular reason for wishing your companionship to-night."

I bowed politely and offered some conventional reply, though this deep air of mystery puzzled me.

"You are a strong man, Mr. Greatorex," he continued, surveying me seriously. "I must tell you that I have no one sleeping in the house save my house-keeper and a maid. The man you saw, who took your horse, sleeps in a cottage at Llanellan." He paused. "I was unfortunate enough to lose my valet a month ago, and so far have been unable to fill his place."

I began to understand. He was in some fear of his lonely condition; possibly he dreaded an attack by his late assailant. Suddenly, too, ran into my memory the scene in the tap-room on the previous night, the miller and his long pipe, and his story. There was that same tale that should have been exciting, about a burglary. And here I was in Ivor Castle.

"If you are thinking of that scoundrel—" I began. "Surely the police—"

He interrupted me with a smile, "The police, Mr. Greatorex, are seven miles from Ivor Castle. But pray do not misunderstand me. I shall be infinitely obliged by your company; it's long since I had an intelligent conversation. But I would not detain you, if you had any scruples about staying."

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The miller must have had some reasons in his talk, I decided.

I laughed. "Not me!" said I, "I will stay and gladly." And in truth I meant it, for the adventure interested me not a little. Was it burglars?

"That is settled then," he said, as he rang the bell. "I thank you."

It was in the dining-room that we spent the evening. This was a long, low-roofed chamber occupying the ground-floor and opening with windows upon the cobble court-yard on the one side and the meadows of the park on the other. These windows, dating from an ancient time, were set in small panes after a fine and delicate design, and abutted slightly with embrasures upon the empty moat. It was a great chamber to contain but two people, but somehow the black oak of the walls and the general air of the upholstery prohibited the thought of discomfort. These walls were not vacant nor this space, but tenanted, if one considered duly, by a concourse of illustrious faces and high-stepping ghosts. Upon this point, as it happened, I was not long left in curiosity, for Mr. Kesteven was in the mood to confide the history of the castle to me. He was a queer creature, partaking, as it seemed to me, of the most diverse and incongruous emotions. Constantly he would set me wondering upon his statements, striving to pick some order in their apparent confusion. One moment quite a sounding pride rang in his pompous annunciation of the titles of some great noble; while, the next, I was driven to suppose by very clear signs that he displayed nothing but a pitiful contempt towards the whole prejudice of race and family. I dare say that there was some base of reconciliation between such seeming inconsistencies; but certainly I could perceive none. The

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man, in fact, struck me as wearing a mask, and that a mask of such severity and primness as to offer very few secrets to his company. And even at his moments of most spacious frankness, I was never able to determine the depth of its genuineness.

He fetched me out some wines, giving me a generous choice, but himself drinking but sparingly.

"No, thank you ; I have never smoked," said he, in reply to my offer of a cigar. "I am a man of very few wants. And though I am by way of being a hermit, as you would say, I am hardly even a student. Certainly I am not religious ; but I suppose I make up with philosophy—the philosophy of a mind which has seen most things, endured many, and measures all ; a mind that at least has learned the worst, and has surrendered its supposititious claims upon the best. Will you not smoke yourself, Mr. Greatorex ? And pray try that port. I understand it to be of a particular year." He insisted gently upon helping me from the decanter, and then dropped softly into his chair. "I conceive that it is just these arrogant pretensions which distinguish between youth and age. With hot blood, and before the impulse of emotions, we are impudent claimants to a dozen El Doradoes. A man graduates in sense only upon that day when he has resolved that he has no right to any of them, and, in any case, will certainly not attain one of them. It is often a desperate encounter ere these councils of despair prevail ; or rather I should call them councils of wisdom, for after the decay of youth, despair is but another style for wisdom. It is resignation, toleration, even contempt, if you will," and he smiled upon me pleasantly, as if deprecating too sharp a criticism upon his crabbed opinions.

Suddenly he rose, and going to a window threw it

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open and leaned forth. I heard somewhere from the deep recesses of the old house a clock striking the hour of one. Mr. Kesteven, his bald head thrust into the rich moonlight, seemed to listen attentively. The night hung silent about the open spaces of the park, and the moonbeams glistened upon the huge oaks down the drive. The air flowed in a sweet stream through the open window. He closed the casement, and turned to me.

"I fear, Mr. Greator, he said, with a smile, "that I have fetched you here under false pretences. But at least you have saved an old man from his own company, which is, after all, somewhat dull fellowship."

"No," said I, echoing his smile. "I have been myself preserved from the hard chairs of a very crowded tap-room, and the quarrelsome attentions of half-drunken farmers."

"Come, come," says he, genially, "you must not give the Swan a villanous reputation."

"Oh, it was not I," I answered, lightly keeping up the triviality, "but a young gentleman of the Gwent."

Mr. Kesteven ceased to smile. "May I ask his name?" he said.

"Montgomery, I believe, but I understand we are sworn friends now, so that no harm is done."

"Montgomery!" he repeated, slowly. "Yes, I have heard the name—a very young and thoughtless man." And he regarded me with a certain reflectiveness.

But it was not of Montgomery I thought when I went to bed, but of the window and the silence of the night, with the moonlight striking on Kesteven's head. Why had he thrown open the casement, and discharged me, so to say, from my obligation as policeman? For that was how I interpreted his words.

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But I had forbore to ask a question of him, partly from some natural delicacy and from respect for his own severe silence, but more, as I believe, because I was frankly engaged by the atmosphere of mystery surrounding him and the castle.

CHAPTER III

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CASTLE

BEFORE breakfast I had the opportunity to make a narrower inspection of the castle as it appeared from without. The morning was fine, the air of those hills delicate and stimulating, and the sunlight struck the woods and valleys with a golden glory. Smoking a cigarette, I strolled round the edifice, surveying with admiring eyes the details of the design. The entrance by the portcullis lay between two solid drum-towers, very formidable to look on. The battlements, which were extremely plain, and by no means perfect, the machicolations being worn into great chasms here and there, stood two storeys away from the base of the castle, and three if the bottom of the moat be counted. Upon the one side of the irregular square which the buildings made, the stonework, as I have said, had fallen into disrepair, and, indeed, no rooms were habitable here. The detritus of centuries had flowed over into the court-yard, and the stones were heaped in a solid accumulation, and overgrown with masses of huge Irish ivy. The southern face of the castle was, so to speak, but a hill of rock. It was at the junction of the southern and western walls that the keep stood, itself raised some twenty feet above the level of the battlements, and the termination of the habitable portion of the fortress. The moat, which was some ten feet deep, was grown upon with grass, and its sides were covered with blackberry and furze and di-

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vers wild creepers. Completing my circuit of the castle, I struck upon a stream, which ran in a full body through the park, and reaching the verge of the woodland leaped suddenly into a torrent, and scattered into a waterfall down the steep face of the hill. While I was wandering upon the margin, watching the tide and swirl of the tiny eddies with lazy satisfaction, I encountered my host, who greeted me courteously.

"You are admiring my little brook," he said. "Yes, it is pretty, but prettier in the copses below, where I think you must have observed it yesterday. Here it runs very gravely; below it is a noisy vagabond. You see it has uses here."

"You draw your water here?" I asked, fascinated with the primitive idea.

"Not unusually," he replied, "but there is a well within the castle, doubtless from the same springs. Yet the brook rendered a more important service in my predecessors' times."

I looked at him inquiringly. He smiled.

"Let me see," he resumed, "if I can give you ocular proof. It should be here." He stopped, and dipping his stick into the water, poked among the pebbles of the stream. "Ah, here it is! I think I have it!" He looked towards the castle, above the battlements of which now flamed the morning sun. They rose some fifty yards away. "There is a connection with the moat by means of a conduit," explained Mr. Kesteven.

I uttered an exclamation of delight and vowed that I must explore further. Assenting graciously, he led the way towards the house, and letting himself gently down the sloping bank, walked, peering about him, along the bottom of the moat. "You will find it overgrown, no doubt," he said. "But your eyes are better than mine. It is ten years since I looked for it."

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I searched amid the trailing creepers and presently discovered the mouth of the conduit. It was of thick stone and mortar, and from its appearance must have been of very ancient construction. But the opening was choked with earth and grass, and probably had been so for centuries. I said as much to Mr. Kesteven.

"No," he returned, "I think not. I believe my predecessor in the tenancy of the castle had it opened some fifty years ago, and flooded the moat for his own amusement. I understand that the experiment was quite successful, and entertained a party of guests, one of whom," he added, dryly, "fell into the water, and was only rescued with some difficulty. But you shall make better acquaintance with our neighborhood after breakfast. I assure you, Mr. Greatorrex, it is worth your study, and this castle of mine is by no means singular."

I was quite at his disposal for a stroll later in the morning, and upon that occasion got my first knowledge of the topography of the Gwent, a knowledge which, as you shall hear, I was glad enough to profit by at a little later period. And here I may set forth in a few words the character of that country, which was destined to be so strangely connected with my fortunes. The castle stood upon a little eminence towards the higher parts of the hills, and looked down towards the east upon a long, broad valley as upon its special domain. This valley, which was some three miles long and little more than a mile across, was enclosed by undulating hills and enveloped in a dense growth of forest. Two roads ran from the castle towards the east downward, one upon either side of the ravine. One of them, not that by which I had mounted on the previous afternoon, we took upon this walk together.

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We had gone about a mile, or rather less, upon this road when we came upon the first signs of life. The country was but sparsely peopled, but here, at any rate, was some remote and faithful settler. The inn—for such it was—bore the name of “The Woodman,” and was, as I conceived, of the sixteenth century at least. It was small, but the out-buildings attaching to it rambled away into the forest behind. The sign swung, creaking, on a green patch of grass before the door. As we drew near, a man lounging in front of the inn suddenly drew his pipe from his mouth and touched his hat.

“Good-morning, Hood,” said my companion, quietly, pausing and leaning on his stick. “These are very pleasant days for us all.”

“They are, sir,” responded the man. He was of middle height, with a great appearance of activity in his sinewy body, and his thin, dark face bore a habitual expression of polite deference. It was as if his air apologized for not already interpreting your unuttered wishes. I understood the reason the next moment.

Mr. Kesteven, turning to me, nodded in a friendly way towards the man.

“You have heard me speak of Hood,” said he, with a faint smile. “He was the valet I mentioned, whom I lost a month back. A month, isn’t it, Hood?”

“Yes, sir, just a month—four weeks and three days that is,” replied the man, respectfully.

“Ah, indeed; it’s wonderful how long time tarries,” said my host, cheerfully. “Business good, Hood? I hope you are not losing by the experiment. I suppose,” he said, turning to me again, “that it is a trying position to be in a subordinate state. Every one likes his independence.”

I assented, conventionally, and Hood waited very courteously until I had made my answer before he

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took up his to reply to his former master's question.

"I can't complain, sir," he said. "There's not much traffic in the Gwent, sir, but I do a certain business."

"Ah, I should have thought it a wiser policy to have gone nearer civilization, Hood. Why not have taken a place at Llanellan?"

A faint but respectful smile hovered on the man's nervous face. "I don't hold so much with Llanellan, sir. This is a tidy house and business will improve, I hope."

"Well, well, let us hope so," was Mr. Kesteven's answer, as his eyes wandered towards the inn. "A pretty place, is it not, Mr. Greatorex?" And then with a glance of scrutiny at the landlord, "You have had an accident, Hood?"

"Yes, sir," was his answer; "a slight accident, sir, nothing of consequence. I fell against the bar yesterday," and he put a finger apologetically to his clean-shaven lip, which I now perceived to be somewhat swollen.

"A nasty fall, a nasty fall," said Mr. Kesteven, shaking his head. "It is lucky it was no worse." He moved away with a courteous nod of his head, to which the inn-keeper responded with a salute. As he did so he turned, and, taking my arm, smiled back at Hood. "You see the Gwent has its visitors sometimes, Hood. Mr. Greatorex is staying with me. So perhaps we may turn The Woodman in time into a fashionable resort of society."

He laughed as if at his own small jest, in which the inn-keeper joined, and, pressing my arm, walked on. He seemed a very kindly master, I thought, and I had no doubt but that Hood had been an excellent servant. I remarked as much, to which he assented cordially.

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"I have never come upon a man who fell into my ways better and knew his work more efficiently," he said. "An admirable servant—altogether admirable. I had great regrets when I was obliged to lose him."

Our walk had exhilarated me, and, what is more, had given me a huge appetite. The result was that I ate heartily of lunch, which was delicately served by the agreeable old housekeeper. Mr. Kesteven also seemed to rally his appetite (for he had eaten but little the previous evening), and drank a good deal of brown sherry, in which he jestingly invited me to join him. But I was for the sour or perfumed claret, which I found much to my palate. Whether it was the sherry or not, my host's tongue plied very continuously during the meal, but always in the most possessed and civil manner. He spoke of his house, of his ancient descent (which was as ancient as the castle), and, finally, of himself. The Kestevens had been people of note in other centuries, had hoarded gains, and fulfilled the pomp even of courts, had fluttered briefly and very brightly and in various characters across the stage of history. But now they were dwindled to this one old feeble man. The race had lost its physical vigor; from contesting tournaments, fighting battles, and intriguing against courts, it had come to philosophizing over life between four walls. These were in the main his own words, but with a sly wink as if he invited me to contest his argument, and was willing to laugh at me if I should do so. And then, falling silent for a time, he inspected his finger-nails, and suddenly, and after a space, rose and pushed back his chair.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Greatorex," he said, with a gesture of apology, "I had not noticed you have not finished. Pray forgive my discourtesy."

Of course I put myself at his disposal, for in truth

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I had eaten and drunk quite enough. But seeming not to hear me, he looked upon the table, and at last raising his eyes to mine, and playing gently, but scarcely in a nervous fashion, with the forks before him, he said, very quietly,

"I have had the honor of your acquaintance for some twenty hours, Mr. Greatorex. It is little two men may know of each other in so brief a time. But I am wont to take quick cognizance of people, and content to risk a mistake. I have always found that it is after all upon impulses that we must be satisfied to contrive our lives. At least there is no further certainty in a deliberation which is long in parturition, and may bring nothing effectual to birth. You have, if you will forgive me saying so, an admirable habit of silence." He paused, and as if it had been to justify his sentence, I held my tongue. "A recluse like myself—that is how you would style me—" he resumed, "must have some occupation for his thoughts. I have explained that I am no student. It follows that I have some other hobby—shall we say?" A ghost of a smile glittered on his face, and then his head turned sharply towards a window which overlooked the court-yard. There was the sound of footsteps upon the rough cobble. "I am about to disclose to you, Mr. Greatorex, the secret of my seclusion."

I rose with him, strangely influenced by this solemn scene. Was it really solemn, or was it the mere whim of old age, the pompous revelation of senile eccentricity? I followed him down the stone passage to the eastern wing of the castle. Fifty paces further brought us to the entrance to the keep, but a dozen yards from this Mr. Kesteven paused, and turning the key in a heavy oaken door, entered into a room of considerable size, which, as you will see, looked forth upon the back part of the park from the second floor.

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Like all the chambers in that ancient building it was panelled with oak. The room was devoid of furniture save for a rickety chair or two, and was wholly destitute of carpet, so that our feet rang loudly upon the stone floor. It seemed to me at that moment, and with the odd preparations for that mission, that I was, so to speak, upon the very edge of a mysterious discovery. Mr. Kesteven placed a chair against the wall, and stepping upon it with difficulty, raised his hand till it touched the topmost panel near the window. There followed a slight creak, and the panel slid back, disclosing a dark and vacant space, in which I could dimly discern the separation of shelves. My host had but dropped his fingers into the recesses of this cupboard when a faint noise caught his ears, and he turned abruptly. I had followed him into the room, and the door stood open. But I turned now with him, and followed the direction of his gaze. The man Hood stood forward in the doorway, with an apologetic air. Mr. Kesteven's hand dropped sharply, and with a certain brusqueness he demanded, "What do you want?"

The ex-valet touched an imaginary hat. "I beg your pardon, sir, I am sure, but I called to know if you would be wanting that gun you spoke of the other day. Mrs. Main didn't know, and I thought that maybe it would save time if I was to ask you myself."

He was a perfect model of servile deportment, displayed no sign of nervousness, but only the rigid good manners of the trained servant. Mr. Kesteven stepped down from the chair, and leisurely dusted his coat-sleeves. Then he looked up, and the westering sun struck full upon his face, which, I could not but observe, was more colorless than usual.

"No, thank you, Hood," he said, suavely. "I have

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"My dear sir," said he, "it is long since I was in a position to pose as a country gentleman, and for my own part I sincerely hope you will occupy the castle as long as I occupy the inn. After that I fear I shall have no further interest in the matter."

I felt distinctly snubbed by the rejoinder, for all that it was delivered in so hearty a manner. But I got out of the inn creditably enough, and with a neat stroke in return, all very good humored. All the same, upon my homeward journey I was troubled by that mutual signal which I had seemed to discover between these two incongruous people. I wondered if it was merely the creation of my fancy, composed by the imperfection of an oblique vision. As for Sercombe's offer, it was plainly intended for a jest, and I thought no more of it. Yet I was still exercised in my mind, vaguely uneasy and distrustful. At one time I was partly of opinion that the untoward mysteries of the past week had perplexed my brain and left me morbidly suspicious, predisposed to see riddles where all was plain and open; while yet again I was divided in a doubt as to the credentials and good faith of every one about me. And in this mood I settled down to consider my situation that evening and to review the events which I have here narrated. The puzzle was to determine a cause for all the remarkable transactions. Some one wanted to acquire the castle, and went about it very persistently. Why? And some one had made raids upon the house to secure something of which I was in possession. What?

Suddenly and as if revealed by a flash of illumination, the reason was lit up, and stood bare and bright before me. It was Treasure!

CHAPTER VI

I MAKE AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY

Now that I had put my tongue to the word I was confident of my discovery. All the facts pointed one way, and I was dumfounded at my previous obtuseness. For what but a hidden store of treasure would explain these incessant attempts upon the house itself, or the insistent efforts to take it out of my hands? And what again but treasure could supply so natural a key to old Kesteven's death and his mysterious secret? It seemed to me, too, that upon this hypothesis several facts hitherto inexplicable might be referred to reason. The eccentricity of my host in choosing me for his heir became not so much an eccentricity as a studious piece of policy. He was, in the general verdict, devoid of living relatives, and had so long fallen out of the world as to be practically friendless. He had made up his mind to my honesty, possibly to my capability, and was resolved to trust me. If this were so, as I saw it now, the making of the will had been an inevitable act in the game he intended to play. I could not imagine that he had foreseen his sudden death, yet with his knowledge that he had an organic disease it was wise to take punctual precautions. It was probable, also, that the news he had evidently received upon the morning of that fatal day had conduced to his visit to the lawyer. I was to be admitted to his confidence. Twice he had been interrupted in the very nick of his narrative—the second time by

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the interposition of Death himself. In these considerations my thoughts were naturally drawn to the events of that evening. Why had Kesteven retired to his room? Obviously there was a connection between his errand and the sheet of parchment which I had detached from his clutch. The revelation, tardy as it was, set my wits whirring like a catherine-wheel.

I opened my despatch-box, and spread out the paper on the table once more, poring over it with my pulse throbbing to my finger-tips. The meaning was now plain, though the main secret was yet to find. The parchment was clearly the second sheet only of the document which Mr. Kesteven had desired to bring down for my perusal. I sat up at a new and more alarming discovery. Where was the first sheet?

That open window now offered up its secret. That desperate cry was no longer now the scream of mortal agony, but an appeal for help. From the dead fingers I had taken the second sheet of the mysterious document, so pregnant with interest, but from the hands of the living I could not doubt that the first had been violently torn in the course of a struggle in that silent chamber. Terror had surprised the rascal at his work—the terror of that sudden and fearful dissolution, of that humped and pitiful body fallen on the floor. And here now with two ends of the secret, whatever it might be, rent asunder and secluded in separate hands, the hoard of treasure still lay buried in its ancient hiding-place, as intact and private as it had lain maybe through hundreds of years of silence. The ruthless and desecrating hand might never reach it now.

My riddle was read. That certainly was a great step, and in the heat of my discovery, as I sat palpitating with strange emotions of adventure, avarice, even of ferocity, I had no intention to leave the matter where it stood. I was resolved to confront fate,

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and to enter the lists against those undetermined enemies. So far they had kept very silent, working only in the dark ; but I swore then and there to meet them, drag them forth into the broad daylight, and contest my rights in the hidden treasure, if it existed, against a dozen sorry knaves. As yet, as you will see later, I did not know all, but my frame of mind was such that it would be strange if I did not know more in a very short time. I am a patient man, and not overquick to take a resolution, but I do not easily lay down a task which I have once undertaken. I swore upon the spot to undertake this.

In the circuit of my fancy I came suddenly upon this consideration, which pulled me up quite sharply, even with a little breathlessness. These unknown antagonists were still banded in arms against me, and I was alone. I had had repeated evidence that I was pursued by their ingenuity, and in two ways. On the one hand I was to be evicted from my own house, and simultaneously my bureau was rifled, as I could not now doubt, for the purpose of securing my remnant of the precious document. What would be the next step which these insolent tricksters would essay ? I had no one in the castle beyond the estimable Mrs. Main and a neat house-maid, neither of whom was to be counted in a warfare such as the situation promised to my imagination. The one man that was daily visible about the place slept at Llanellan, as Mr. Kesteven had informed me. What puzzled me at this point was the isolation in which my host had enwrapped himself. He had taken no pains to protect himself. Exposed, as he must have known he was, to the treachery of an unscrupulous foe, he was thrown absolutely upon his own resources, unless indeed he relied upon the near proximity of Hood in times of emergency. But Hood perplexed me, recurring in my thoughts, a

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haunting figure, provoking only a vague uneasiness and a great uncertainty. And once again the odd conjunction of the captain and the innkeeper returned before my eyes. One thing was certain to my newly awakened wits—I must have some companion in my confidence. There were several friends among my old acquaintances who would serve me, but the year was drawing on, and the holiday season was at its height. The odds were that I should discover Pengelly or Rogers or Sheppard were far enough from London by this. I wanted aid forthwith, and forthwith must have it. So it fell that my mind recurred to Montgomery. He was not very much to my taste, certainly not congenial company, but he was obviously honest, and I could swear that he would be faithful.

And so indeed he proved. I rode over next morning to the farm which constituted now all that was left of the old estate of the family. He was plaiting a whip in his dining-room—a high wainscoted chamber, very dingy and untidy, and heaped with all the unimaginable rubbish of a young man's fancy. On my entrance he rose, his silly face beaming red, and grasped my hand with an awkward sentence of welcome.

"It's good of you to come so soon," said he.

"I've come to take you back," said I.

He stared at me. "Oh, all right," he said, as if this mission of mine had been a matter of course. "Come, and have a drink."

It was but eleven in the morning, though the breakfast things still cumbered his table, and so I refused his hospitality—a refusal which did not prevent him pouring himself out a glass of beer.

"Montgomery," said I, "leave that alone, and keep your head clear. I want you."

The boy bounded to his feet, sheepishly enough to

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what he doubtless considered my rebuke, but with a show of eagerness which pleased me.

"Got your horse?" I asked.

He nodded, all attention now. "Then fling your legs up and be off. And ask your servant to send on your bags. I'm going to keep you for a week."

"Bully!" he said, and clamored out of the room in a cheery fashion, in which his delight was obviously expressed.

I had already made up my mind not to be too explicit with Montgomery. He was too recent an acquaintance, despite my conviction of his fidelity, to intrust with a precious secret. Indeed, the first occasion of our encounter would not have commended him to many particular people. But I was bound to give him some inkling of the situation; otherwise he would be worse than useless to me, a mere encumbrance upon my actions. What I told him, therefore, as we rode back, embraced but the general atmosphere of intrigue in which I was involved. The word that stuck in his mind was "burglary," and it greatly excited him.

"Shall we have the police over?" he asked, anxiously.

But, strangely enough, although the thought had occurred to me more than once, it was almost in old Kesteven's words that I replied.

"There are none nearer than Raymond." To that I added, "Besides, I think we two are in no need of assistance against a ruffian or two."

He was quite of my mind, and smacked his lips upon the adventure, spurring his horse forward as though he feared we should be too late for the desperate encounter which must surely await us at the castle.

As a matter of fact, the next two days passed very

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peaceably. As I am fond of laying my plans ahead, I wrote to Sheppard at his chambers, asking him if he were still in town, and if he felt disposed to pay me a visit, referring briefly to the strange turn which my fortunes had taken. I saw nothing of the captain, at least at the castle, and for some reason or other I felt no desire to revisit him just now. He had evidently forgotten my invitation, nor did I remind him of it when we met casually upon the road the day after Montgomery's arrival. He gave me a civil greeting, cocking his eye at my companion in his good-humored, cynical way; and when we had passed, on looking back, I saw him standing at the cross-roads, rod in hand, gazing intently after us. Seeing me do so, he waved his hand and moved off upon his journey. Montgomery was as docile as a spaniel, submitting readily, I suppose, to the superior will, and I had no complaint to make of him, save that he wearied me a good deal. He himself, however, had a complaint, for he was grievously disappointed that there had been no bloodshed. We saw not a show of a burglar, and I fancy he thought me in his private mind something of an impostor; which possibly was the very reason which made him strike up an acquaintance with Sercombe. I certainly had no right to protest, for the captain was a pleasant fellow, and, so far as I knew, harmless; and, moreover, life at the castle was not enlivening. But all the same, I was a little annoyed to find them upon such close terms with one another. Montgomery made no secret of his fascination. The man captured his foolish imagination as easily as I might net a moth or a butterfly, and the younger man was open ears to all the romantic and remarkable tales which the soldier of fortune had at his call.

The third day after Montgomery's arrival I resolved to ride into Raymond to see the little lawyer, and

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mounting the black horse which had come to me as part of my inheritance I left the castle shortly before lunch. The nag was a steady creature, though not very handsome to the eyes, and shortly I was upon the other side of Llanellan, and cantering down into the long stretch of forest which lies towards the little town. Here, as it chanced very oddly, whom should I meet but Greenstreet himself, driving out to the castle upon the very point of business on which I was bound for Raymond. Encountering thus we agreed to make a convenience of the locality, since I could not persuade him to turn back with me, and we completed our conversation over a pint of ale at the little hostelry in Llanellan. The transaction was comprised in a brief time, and, that finished, I turned my horse's head forthright for home.

As I drew near the park gates it wanted a little of four by my watch. The sun beamed sharply overhead, and the great ilex by the stone pillars of the gateway threw a black blot of shadow across the drive. I headed the horse across the sward, making for the stables which lay among the farm buildings to the north of the castle. Leaving the animal in charge of the handy man, Williams, I walked back by way of the park, skirting the western wing of the building. Upon this side, as I have said, lay a dense shrubbery, through which the little brook streamed over its pebbly bottom to the waterfall upon the southern declivity of the hill. A pathway ran circuitously through this growth of laurel and box, evidently of comparatively recent origin; and winding by several pretty spots, bordered with the rivulet, finally emerged upon the boundary of the park, and joined a cross-track from the gateway by a leafy avenue of limes. As it was early, and I was in no mood to face Montgomery all at once, I struck into the shrubbery, and sauntered

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quietly along the pathway. My feet made little noise upon the thick grass, and what sound they did make was covered by the babbling of the water. Suddenly at a bend before me and slipping softly round the elbow, I beheld the figure of a man, but it was gone ere my senses were fully awake in that sultry afternoon. I stood still a moment, stirred somewhat strangely, and then ran quickly to the corner. Peering round, I caught sight of a figure stealing among the shrubs; it paused a moment, and then, as it seemed to me, slipped stealthily through the bushes and disappeared.

The next instant I had recognized Hood. There was nothing very remarkable in this, but what moved my blood was a more curious recognition. Swift as the flight of a swallow, there darted into my mind the recollection of another vision. I identified the memory. It came back upon me with an odd sense of perplexity, and a still stranger feeling of fear, where and when I had first encountered that lean and stealthy body. I had seen the man disappear in the same furtive fashion upon the banks of the stream in the valley below; and what had then arrested my vague memory, now also again attacked it, but this time with certain knowledge. This was the man who had been with Mr. Kesteven upon the day on which I had first encountered him in the wood.

The fact astounded me—thrilled through my warm limbs to the very marrow of my bones. And yet it seemed too absurd to be accepted on the spur of a moment's fancy. I stood pondering in a state of excitement, and then, hastily turning about, ran in the direction of the castle.

What was Hood's business there? I asked myself the question without the assurance of an answer. There was really but little to arouse my suspicions,

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and yet I was agog with curiosity. I entered the castle court-yard, and opened the door of the dining-hall. The first object that met my eyes was Montgomery, sprawling upon the table, and stertorous with drunken sleep. Plates were laid for two, and empty bottles upon the table testified to a generous lunch. Leaving him for a moment I ran up-stairs, and pushed open my door silently. As I did so there was an exclamation, and I entered, and came face to face with Captain Sercombe.

I cannot say that the surprise fell with its full force upon me, for I was at such a high pitch of excitement that facts did not keep their natural value. Yet I was for the moment at a loss for my bearings, and, as a matter of fact, he was the first to recover. He held one hand in his tightly buttoned coat, and looked at me with a watchful eye.

"This is very regrettable, Mr. Greatorrex," he said.

The apology sounded so ludicrous in my ears that I broke into a tiny laugh, and thereby relieved myself. The time for action was come.

"I must apologize," said I, "for my unexpected return; the more particularly as I have no doubt interrupted you on important business."

"Not at all," he said, pleasantly; "not at all. I had quite finished."

"Then if you have been successful, Captain Sercombe," said I, as pleasantly as himself, "I think we had better understand each other at once."

A slight smile ruffled his puffy face, but he kept his hand in its hiding-place. "That will be unnecessary, sir, I assure you," he rejoined. "I fear I am a bad hand at crib-cracking."

The effrontery of the man amazed me, but I showed nothing in the face that I wore.

"Why not give it up?" I asked, smoothly.

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He shrugged his shoulders. "Almost you persuade me," he returned, jauntily.

"Fishing," I resumed, "is a more equanimous pastime, Captain Sercombe, I have heard."

"No doubt," he responded, equably, and glancing at the window. A twitching of his mouth belied his calm appearance, and I was disposed to believe that he contemplated a desperate move. I sat down upon a chair by the door and surveyed him coolly.

"May I ask," said I, "if you have found this sort of thing usually profitable?" I nodded at my bureau.

"I was in hopes this would prove so," he answered, smoothly. "I am not an old hand at it."

"But you have able assistants?" I asked.

"Come, come, Mr. Greatorex," he replied, with a touch of impatience in his voice. "Let us get to business."

"By all means," said I. "You will find me a most reasonable man. In my profession I have had occasion several times to deal with your profession."

If I had expected him to wince at this undisguised thrust I was doomed to disappointment. A smile flitted over his face, and that was all. He withdrew his hand from the breast of his coat. "May I sit down?" he inquired, in his most courteous manner.

"Come," said I, "it is rather I who should apply to you for permission."

"We will not stand upon ceremony," he observed, whipping a chair deftly beneath him.

"A very natural sentiment upon your part," I retorted, ironically.

"Mr. Greatorex," said he, with his smile, and now thoroughly in charge of himself, "there is one thing I pride myself upon, and that is command of my temper."

"A very useful trait—in your profession," I remarked.

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The captain took a cigarette from his case. "You will not mind," said he; "the window will air your bedroom," and he puffed the smoke from his nostrils, and it hung about his ragged red mustache. I waited, my eyes fastened on him.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, presently.

His own expression carried not a trace of anxiety, and he put the question for all the world as if it were impossible that my reply could materially affect him.

"In these cases," I made answer, "there is a natural course with which her Majesty's dutiful subjects do not usually tamper. For my own part, I confess that I was at first tempted to take matters into my own hands, but on reflection I do not think I shall interrupt the ordinary course of justice."

"Ah," he said, taking the cigarette from his mouth, "you will call in the law?"

I nodded, and a slow smile illumined his red face.

"I think I can persuade you to forego that satisfaction," he said, "though I may possibly find it more difficult to prevent your earlier resolution."

"I am entirely in your hands," said I, smiling to him; for, indeed, I was now chuckling to myself not only at the man's equanimity, which was quite to my taste, but at my own mastery of the situation.

He looked at me inquiringly, and I was amazed to see the difference in his eyes now. They were tense, sharp, and every trace of idle indifference had left them.

"You are aware, Mr. Greatorex, what we are quarrelling over?"

"I assure you, my dear sir," said I, "that I am quarrelling over nothing. I am sitting at your feet. Pray continue."

"I think," said he, dryly, "that we are beating about the bush. This game of tierce and carte is very

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well for novices, but we are got beyond that and come to actual quarters. Come, I think this air of yours is a mere affectation which has played its part."

It pulled me up quite unpleasantly to be thus put in the wrong—snubbed, so to speak, by a common scoundrel, as I considered him; but I said nothing save, "I am waiting to hear you, Captain Sercombe."

"You are aware," said he, "what you have in this house." He was watching me very carefully, ready, I did not doubt, to cry off in another direction if I showed my ignorance of his meaning.

"I know what you and your friends are after," said I. He heaved a sigh of relief.

"Then I table my cards," said he. "You have a piece of paper which I want."

"Exactly," I answered, casting a look at my open bureau. He laughed.

"Oh, I will admit you have the better of me so far," he exclaimed. "But we are not yet at the end of the campaign."

"No," said I; "not until the police from Raymond arrive." He leaned forward and tapped me on the arm very earnestly.

"You mistake me," he said. "I think, Mr. Greator, that you do not quite understand the position."

"Upon my soul," said I, "I believe you are right. When a common burglar shall preach to his victim, one must indeed revise one's notions of the world."

"You are determined to be flippant, Mr. Greator," he replied, severely, "and so I will disillusionize you. You have inherited this property from Mr. Kesteven?"

I bowed.

"A gentleman with whom I had not the pleasure of personal acquaintance," he resumed, "but whom I have reasons for considering a very discreet and

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tenacious man. Now why, Mr. Greatorex," he said, and he stared at me dispassionately—"now why do you suppose that Mr. Kesteven did not employ these police of yours?"

The question certainly took me aback. I had never considered it. If the old gentleman had feared an attack, why had he not taken precautions against it? But I was not inclined to make a poor appearance in the argument, and so, "He had excellent reasons," I said, cheerfully.

"You say well," said he, nodding, but scrutinizing me keenly. "Excellent, indeed; with which, since you are obviously acquainted, you will no doubt understand a good many things which would otherwise puzzle you."

Here I confess he had me again in his hands. "Quite so," I stammered, as bravely as possible.

He laughed softly. "I think, Mr. Greatorex, that we had really better understand each other, and not be so damned civil. What you don't know, despite your brave profession of knowledge, is that the treasure disposed in this house is treasure-trove; that is, that it was not the property of the late Mr. Kesteven, and was not in his power to bequeath, and consequently is not now your property, but the property of her Gracious Majesty, our Sovereign Lady Queen Victoria, whom God preserve, less a somewhat infinitesimal percentage which we may term salvage, and which neither you nor I nor any one else, I warrant, would care to throw away the chance of a large fortune to obtain in exchange. That, I take it, is a statement which is new to you."

It was, indeed; and now that the facts were revealed to me, suddenly, and as by magic, the many mysteries of the past few weeks were illumined and grew plain. I kept my countenance as well as I might, for all my astonishment, and then—

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"This is very interesting," said I, "and I am in your debt for the news."

"Bah, Mr. Greatorex," he interrupted. "Haven't I said that we must dispense with civilities. Time passes, I have much before me, and we have not concluded our bargain."

"Bargain!" I echoed.

"Why, certainly," said the captain, grinning pleasantly. "I take it that we are enemies, but that we make war upon terms."

"State your terms," said I, coldly, having now an inkling as to the new situation.

"That is better," said he, approvingly. "In the first place, this contest is a private one, carried on by both sides without public assistance."

"That is very well, indeed," said I, "for a party, numbers unknown, against one man."

"If I have gathered any impression of your character, Mr. Greatorex," observed the captain, dryly, "during a few days' acquaintance, you will be prompt to destroy that inequality. I put no embargo upon your numbers."

"That is good of you," said I, sarcastically.

"Secondly," continued he, unmoved, and counting on his fingers, "there is no reason why this campaign should breed ill-will. I like you, and, off duty, there is room for exchange of friendly courtesies."

"You forget," I said, sharply, "in what relation I find you. There can be no peace between your profession and mine."

He smiled.

"The incident was an unpleasant necessity," said he, airily. "But come, Mr. Greatorex, this attitude of high morals would be very well in you were you the proper heir; but what are we but both upon the same level? Robbers, bandits, what you will, certainly with

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no great reason for pride; and at least I face the position and would ask you to do the same."

The words of the man completely abashed me. And when I considered, he spoke no more than the truth, and I may tell you that the truth was very unpalatable. It was not so much that I had scruples upon the course to which I was committing myself, as that it irked me grievously to be computed with this scandalous fellow for a copartner in crime. He said truly when he described us as upon the same level. We were conspiring each in his way against the laws of the country, and risking our liberties in an illegal attempt to steal what the custom of the kingdom had claimed as the spoils of the crown. I have my own code of honor, and this has been pretty liberal in regard of certain laws imposed upon us by traditional habit rather than from any definite moral sanction; but I will admit that the captain's reasoning confounded me, and I was left staring hopelessly at the situation in a kind of humiliation against which I kicked in vain. Yet I was not for his seeing so much as a wink or a blink in me, and I think I was successful in carrying off the position.

"You must not misunderstand me," said I, after a pause in which I digested these reflections. "I put my value on my own situation, and I am willing to agree to these terms, so far, at least, as they consort with my own inclinations. You will not look for a greater consideration than I would bestow upon you apart from this struggle in which we are involved?"

"Why certainly not," said he, gayly, and as one who had gained his point.

"Very well," said I, rising. "And that commits us to very little."

He scowled a little at this, as I could see, but re-

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covering his face, rose also, and, as I live, had the impudence to open the door to me.

"Then, Mr. Greatorex," said he, "we have concluded, and we know where we stand."

At this I pulled myself up short, and fetching my watch out of my pocket, I said :

"I know this, Captain Sercombe, that I give you three minutes to be free of the castle and outside the gate. After that time I will take what steps I choose against burglars !"

The smile vanished from his face, and was succeeded by a nasty frown. "You forget," he said, "that I am here as an invited guest."

"What ! in my chamber ?" said I, hotly. "The devil take your invitation. That I reserve for myself."

He came into the passage. "I believe," said he, as amiably as ever, "that I am now within the precincts of my right, and within the rights of hospitality."

"As you choose," said I, sullenly. "And that being so, I will trouble you to awaken your host from a drunken slumber, concocted I know not how."

"My dear sir," said the captain, laughing now quite cheerfully, "there is no concoction necessary, I assure you. A bottle of whiskey or Burgundy to his elbow, and my young friend Montgomery asks nothing better. And I trust that you will give me credit for this, that I do not trespass upon another gentleman's cellars."

"No," said I. "You keep sober, I grant you," and stalked somewhat angrily down the stairs.

Montgomery lay where I had left him, but lifted his head upon our entrance, glaring with a stupid and miserable eye upon us.

"Ah," said the captain, pleasantly, "my young friend is himself again, or at least wants but a bucket



“‘I GIVE YOU THREE MINUTES TO BE FREE OF THE CASTLE!’”

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of cold water," and he clapped him on the back in a friendly fashion.

"You had better take him away," said I, curtly; but at that remark, and after glancing from one to the other, the boy's eyes rested upon my face with a look of consternation, and suddenly he buried his face in his arms with a sort of sob.

"Faith, I am in the way here," said the captain, merrily, and without more ado he shuffled out of the house, leaving me alone with the wretched youth.

I stood for a time regarding him with indifference, but presently another mood overtook me. He was honest and leal, I could swear, but he was an arrant fool, and had a very sorry vice. I put my hand on his shoulder. After all, I owed to him that I had brought my fox into the open.

"Montgomery," said I, "you have been guilty of a grave breach of faith. But so far we are not the losers by it. And I think if you will take the advice of your friend, the captain, we shall be in a better condition to discuss this presently."

He took the hint, turned from me a blotchy face of shame, and hurried with little dignity from the room. It was half an hour ere he returned, and presented me an air of determination which I could guess had been assumed with difficulty. It was then that, without referring to his own conduct, I explained in a general way the harm he had done me.

"You have said hard words to me, Mr. Greatorrex," he said. "None the less hard because they are true. And, by God! I deserve them all. I am no better than a sot, but I could forgive myself all that if it had not been for the mischief to you, of which you speak."

I appreciated the struggle which had been contested in the silly head.

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"As it turns out, you have done me less mischief than you think," I replied.

"That is no excuse," he retorted, hotly. "I have acted like a cad, but I will ask you to believe that I have the best will in the world to be your friend."

"You could be a very good friend to me," I answered, "if you would obey orders. A good soldier, Montgomery, has a scrupulous conscience while on duty. Outside that he may be what he will."

"I have done what I would all my life," he said, moodily. "And I am all the worse for it."

"That is very likely," said I, dryly. "But now you have the chance to amend."

He looked up eagerly. "Do you give me another chance?" he asked, earnestly. "Mr. Greatorex, I will ask no questions. I don't pretend to understand the position. But you are free to use me."

"I am going to trust you," I answered him, "and in proof of my resolve, I will leave you in charge here to-morrow."

An expression of satisfaction lit up his features.

"You will not regret it," he said. "And as for that scoundrel, Sercombe"—he paused, with a savage look of dislike—"I will catch him, and break his bottles over his head."

CHAPTER VII

I. RUN A RISK, AND AM HOTLY PURSUED

I HAD already resolved that it would be folly to depend upon Montgomery alone. Now that he was aroused and upon his guard I had no doubt of his constancy for a few days. But there was no saying how soon he might relapse. And in any case I needed a wiser head than his to oppose the cunning of the enemy; not to say that we should welcome two more strong arms, should it come to the fact of war. That the captain and his friends, whoever they were, were in deep earnest and would stick at little, I was by this time fully convinced—a conviction in which I was justified, as you shall hear presently. It was very plain that we were none of us in a position to demand assistance from the law. We were adventurers all, and now that I had had time to face the thought, I confessed it without a blush, resolved, if anything, that it was a virtuous action to baffle such a pack of hardened scoundrels. But several duties importuned me greatly—of which one was to determine how far this plot had run, and the particulars and persons of our enemies. Sercombe himself was one, and I had no doubt but that he was co-operating cordially with Hood, that sleek and impassive scamp. Questions upon the Jew also flickered in my mind; and for the rest I must keep my senses brisk, and my wits awake.

But the most instant task lay before me that morning, and had been decided ere I went to bed the pre-

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vious evening. I must have Sheppard or Rogers to help me against these odds, and that forthright. Here again I was confronted with a third necessity, and luckily saw a means to conjoin both. These rascals were after my piece of parchment, without which their own fragment was useless. I must dispose of this at once, and get rid of so much peril at the least. It was true that I might possibly drag Sheppard down by the telegraph, but then again this was most uncertain in a man of his temperament. He would want the persuasion of a sudden impulse, and, above all, a stirring narrative to thrill his pulses such as might be presented to him in a personal interview.

Moreover, if I went to London, my paper should go with me. And what was easier than to persuade Sheppard, and secure my document at one throw? These considerations pointed to a journey to town, and that I must take at once, and before either Montgomery's ardor had failed, or the enemy had prepared a blow. I reckoned upon an interval of time after the recent exchanges between myself and the captain. What quickened my intentions was an incident which occurred shortly after breakfast, and while I was still debating the dangers of the situation. I went to my room at eleven, and began to pack a valise methodically in the manner of a man who has all his life been used to his own labors. The last and the most important particular in this work was to put up my writing-case securely. To make sure of my precious paper, I unlocked the case and took out the sheet. I was upon the point of replacing it, when I suddenly decided to put it in my pocket, which accomplished, I buttoned my coat tightly.

At this moment I heard the noise of a snapping bough, and hastily looked forth by the window. The lowermost branch of a sycamore that stood upon the

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edge of the moat hung swinging in the air, and showing a great gap of naked white wood. I sprang up, put my head out of the window, and could just catch a sight of some one vanishing round the corner of the building. This news of the enemy came very sharply upon me, and without stopping to complete my packing, I ran out of the door and took the stairs three steps at a time. But no stranger was visible when I emerged upon the park, and I was driven back upon Mrs. Main. Here I had a clew, for certainly a stranger had come up to the castle by the gates half an hour before; but according to the house-keeper no mystery enveloped him. He had rung manfully at the bell, and demanded Mr. Williams, and had been sent on to the farm buildings by Mrs. Main herself, who had overseen his interview with the house-maid.

"What was this man like?" I asked.

But here Mrs. Main was puzzled, not because she had not noticed, but because she was at a loss to convey her impressions in English.

"He was a short, dark young fellow, sir," said she, "and something odd about him;" but what that oddness was she could not tell, and completed the picture by ascribing to him "a squint and somethink funny-like in his walk," adding again, and with a sudden elation, "like what a sailor might be."

These details covered more than the house-maid could give me, who, however, seemed pleased to add as her own contribution that "he had a nice dark mustache," and with this preliminary inquiry I strode off to find Williams at the stables.

The stranger had been there; of that there was no question. Williams, a sharp, undersized, and black-avised Welshman, with a passion of sentiment in his meagre body, confirmed the description given by Mrs. Main. The man had inquired if there was any chance

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of a job, but seemed (so thought Williams) inconsiderably concerned as to whether there was or was not. He added that the intruder was a foreigner, but to this statement I paid no attention, as to the Welsh, and indeed to all country people, the word implies little more than stranger. It was plain, however, that the fellow was my arboreal spy, and that was all I wanted, as in fact it was more than enough. I admit that I was disconcerted, but the more resolute to go forward with my London expedition. I have said that I reckoned upon an interval of truce. My ideas were destined to a rude subversal.

It was upon three when I started to ride into Raymond, for upon second thoughts I decided to leave my valise behind and put up with the provision of my own chambers in the Temple. As I reached The Woodman the thin figure of Hood was discernible, smoking in front of his door. From the distance I saw that he was talking with a companion, but when I drew level with the inn the second man had disappeared. Hood straightened himself on the sight of me, took his pipe from his mouth, and touched his hat with his habitual respectfulness. I had been wondering how the man would demean himself, aware as I was of his connection, in some way, with the plot against me. But not a trace of discomfort or confusion showed in his face, which was as grave as ever. He was clothed in a suit of very dark tweed, his brown face, cut very clean, and without an ounce of waste flesh, cool as a statue's, the thin smoke rising from the pipe which he held behind his back. If a valet could wear this face of indifference, why certainly so could I; and to make a point better than himself, I pulled in the nag and addressed him.

"Captain Sercombe in?" I asked, as if in the most cordial manner.

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"No, sir," replied Hood. "He's fishing, sir, I believe, down the valley."

"What, fishing again, Hood?" said I. "He will catch something one of these days if he isn't careful."

"I hope he will, sir," said the innkeeper, politely, allowing himself the shadow of a smile at my apparent witticism.

There was a definite pause. It is a difficult matter to maintain a conversation with one who keeps the tacit habits of a servant.

"Have you received your legacy yet?" I asked, gathering my reins.

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir," said Hood. "Very acceptable, sir, from my poor master."

I was astounded at this obstinate appearance of ignorance, until I suddenly reflected that he might not be aware that I associated him with the captain. I leaned over and looked at him fixedly.

"I wonder what the devil made him leave you that?" I asked.

Hood met my gaze with obsequious tranquillity.

"I have wondered myself, sir," he said. "But he was a kind master, and he seems to have been pretty eccentric, as you might say, in his manner of leaving."

There was something for me to digest as I might, but though I was assured that the innuendo was by way of retaliation, I kept my temper; the man's air was so civil.

"Look here, my man," said I, "what were you doing that Tuesday afternoon by the stream yonder when your master met with his accident?"

Hood's luminous eyes rested on mine for an instant, but he never moved a muscle. "I was with my poor master," he said.

I laughed. "Assisting him, no doubt," I said, dryly.

"No, sir; struggling with him," came the answer,

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pat as you please. I stared at him in amazement at the effrontery of the admission.

"Upon my soul," said I, "I am not sure but I ought to give you in charge."

Hood said nothing, but waved the smoke from his pipe away from me with a neat gesture.

"You admit," said I, "you were robbing your master."

"No, sir," said Hood, quietly. "You came too soon, sir."

I shook my reins with an oath; I could make nothing of the fellow. Hood stepped back as the horse shied.

"Thank you, sir; good-afternoon, sir," said he, civilly, and I struck my whip into the flanks of the animal and rode off without so much as a nod.

I was utterly confounded by this genteel, civil-spoken scoundrel with his impassive audacity. It began to dawn upon me now in what relations these men had stood. The legacy I attributed, as no doubt did the recipient, to a piece of eccentricity on Kesteven's part. But I had more than an inkling now of the plan of treatment which he had adopted. Hood knew too much, and he was bound to keep up appearances with him. Kesteven had a good idea of the danger with which he was threatened, had probably discharged the man with that knowledge, and yet up to the close he must needs keep his secret by a feint of his former kindly relations. I remarked several occasions upon which Hood had made an appearance in our conversation, and I now recognized the way in which his name was treated. There must have been even something of amusement in their relations to the suave and resolute old man, who had made up his mind to face so base and vigorous a plot all alone.

I rode into the reach of forest beyond Llanellan, and



“‘WHAT WERE YOU DOING THAT TUESDAY AFTERNOON?’”

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presently came out upon a more open spot, where the trees hemmed in a piece of ground, tufted with bush and bracken. At a turn of the road beyond me I saw a figure, seemingly that of a clergyman, walking to meet me. As I made this mental observation, and without a note of warning there came the crack of a gun, and a bullet ploughed a ridge in the grass before the horse's belly. The beast reared and came down upon his haunches, nearly throwing me, and I was aware that the man in front was running towards me, shouting. As I steadied the horse my eyes went in another direction and lit upon Sercombe stalking easily towards me with a gun upon his arm. The two men came up to me about the same time.

"I hope there is no accident," gasped the clergyman. Sercombe put out his hand.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Morgan," said he. "How do you do, Greatorex?" he continued, coolly. "No, I am glad to say there's no harm done, is there, Greatorex? But it's all my fault. This infernal undergrowth diverted the shot. I hope it did not scare you too much?" he asked, smiling at me.

I was too much astounded and far too indignant for words. "I thought I'd got the hare all right," he resumed, amiably to the clergyman. "Lucky, for you, Greatorex, as well as for me," and then turning to me. "Do you know Mr. Morgan, the vicar of Llanellan. My friend, Mr. Greatorex, you know—lately succeeded to the castle yonder. A fine property; I envy him," and he stood leaning upon the barrel of his gun and grinning at me.

His impudence was startling. Here was a man who had just made a barefaced attempt upon my life (for that was how I conceived it), and he was engrossing the conversation upon friendly terms and in the most cheerful spirit between his intended victim and the

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stranger who had all but actually witnessed his atrocious act of treachery. The bare audacity had left me gaping at the outset of the encounter, but the very process of his easy talk served to give me my wits again, and I was able to meet him upon his own terms; which I did, delivering a long, keen glance at him.

"I am afraid you are an indifferent sportsman, Captain Sercombe," said I, after I had acknowledged the introduction ceremoniously. "You do better with the rod than with the gun. I see I must take you in hand for a lesson. When you see me shoot I shall shoot straight, even if the enemy be a hare."

Sercombe laughed and patted my horse's flank. The vicar looked from one to the other in some bewilderment, as well he might, for we had disposed of a curious incident somewhat cavalierly.

"I am pleased to have made your acquaintance, Mr. Greatorex," said he. "And I trust we shall see more of each other."

In my heart I hoped not, but I gave him the proper rejoinder, and, taking off his hat, he moved away. Sercombe and I were left upon the roadway confronting each other.

"And now, sir," said I, quietly. "Will you be good enough to tell me what this means? and why do you shoot at hares with bullets?"

"Let me walk with you a little way," responded the captain, shouldering his gun. Suiting his action to the invitation, he marched beside me. "It is very plain, Mr. Greatorex," said he, pleasantly. "It means that you must have a lesson, but I need not assure you that I bear no ill-will to you. On the contrary, I have taken a great taste for you. But it is obvious to you that sentiment has no place in a mere matter of business."

It is not an uncommon practice with me to carry a

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pistol, and certainly, if it had never entered my head before, I think that the strange fortunes of the last week would have persuaded me to the precaution. As it was, the revolver lay to my hand in my coat-pocket and I took my course forthwith. Whipping round the horse, I drew and presented the weapon at his heart.

"You will do me the favor, Captain Sercombe," said I, sharply, "to hand over your cartridges."

An indefinite expression of surprise passed over his face; he was evidently taken aback, and his high color strengthened. "Oh, come, my dear sir," said he, but showing no trace of his emotion in his voice. "I cannot afford to throw the dice twice. His reverence has saved the hazard. Come, you shall have the pellets, if you will," he continued, smiling, as I made no answer. "But I ask you to consider if it be worth while. For my own part I have no desire to fire in your back, nor dare I if I had. You see I am plain with you."

He certainly was, and I saw at once that I need fear no more for the present—at least from the captain.

"Very well," said I.

"I am glad you agree with me," he remarked. "It is a saving of dignity."

I said no more, but whipped up the horse, and left him with a mocking bow, which he returned gravely; and the last I saw of him was his bulky form leaning upon the gun, and assiduously following me with his dull and fishy eyes.

I put up the horse at the Swan and hurried to the station, barely in time to catch the London train. I took my ticket hastily, and rushing down the platform, cast about me precipitately for a first-class carriage. The guard had retired to the back part of the train, and stood impatiently, flag in hand. I came upon two compartments of the class I wished, and

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gave a hurried glance into each ; the one appeared empty, but the other already contained two or three travellers. This latter, however, was labelled "smoking," and for a second or two I wavered in the balance, until a sharp "Now then, sir !" from the guard finally whipped up my decision. I opened the door of the smoking-carriage, but as I did so a man rudely stumbled against me, and I fell against the next compartment, the door of which had just been opened by a third person. In the flurry of the moment I merely remember getting back my clutch upon the handle, and the next instant I was in the smoking-carriage, somewhat hot and angry. Out of the window by which I sat I saw in the tail of my eye the two men stepping swiftly into the next compartment, and something vaguely troubled my senses.

I settled into the cushions as the train drew out of the station, and looked about at my companions. Then my mind returned to the landscape, which was now passing pretty swiftly. It struck me in a flash what was exercising my mind. A squint—that was it ! Mrs. Main had described the intruder of the morning as a man with a "squint—funny like." And the man who had got into the next carriage was a man with a squint. The coincidence was only remarkable because I was in a veritable net of suspicion. And when I examined the particulars it was his companion who had jostled me—I might, to be thoroughly suspicious, say, shoved me. Why had I been shoved ? Perhaps it was an accident, and the two men had no relation to each other ; nor the second man with the squint to Mrs. Main's friend. But, on the other hand, that shove came near sending me through the open doorway of the next carriage, and, but for my own obstinacy, I might now be seated in the seclusion of that carriage with my two neighbors, in an express that

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did not stop for forty miles. On the whole, I was glad I had decided upon the smoking-carriage, even though my companions looked very dull and respectable. We may even taste too much life upon occasion. I can assure you that I grew mightily reflective.

At Paddington I took a cab. I could see the man with the squint nowhere, and I looked for him pretty sharply; his companion's face I had not seen, and should not, of course, recognize again. It was quite possible that they had been passengers to an intermediate station only, in which case, as I conceived, I had been using my imagination in vain. It was by this time a little after six, and as the dead season had fully set in the streets in the West End were bare of carriages, but a concourse of people still streamed along the pavements—the tide of life ran to all appearance as populous as ever. When I reached my chambers in the Temple I made a more suitable toilet for the town, and, that completed, found my watch stood at seven-thirty. The night was rapidly descending, and already the elms in the gardens of the court were enveloped in the sombre shadows of evening. As I stood peering out of the window I was struck roughly into another mood by the apparition of a face on the pavement below. It came suddenly into the lamp-light and vanished in the next instant, but I had recognized that horrid squint in the flash. I drew away sharply, and considered. I will confess the discovery chagrined me, and set the pulses throbbing in my body. There could be no doubt but the fellow had tracked me here, and was watching for me to come out. Here again was the hand of my unscrupulous enemy, striking at me three hundred miles away and in the heart of London. But I must needs come to a determination promptly. I saw at once that my plans must be relaid. These men were after the piece of parchment I had in my

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pocket. I began to feel desperate. I felt the pocket-book under my hand. I certainly could not think of leaving it, as I had intended, in my rooms; for, if I knew anything of these gentry, I should return to find the place rifled. There was little they would stick at, as I had had proof. I made up my mind to try for Sheppard; it was possible that he was in town, and in any case I would not leave the document off my person. In the mean time I was feeling extremely hungry, and was resolved to make a meal. It was certain the scoundrels would not assail me in the open.

I scrutinized the court as I came out, but naturally the spies were not likely to show themselves. Then I drove to the Café Royal and enjoyed an excellent dinner. From where I sat in the dining-room I had a view through an open door of the great hall beyond, in which the representatives of a dozen nationalities drank and chattered and played their dominos. Half-way through my meal I looked up, and there was my friend unobtrusively sipping a glass of vermouth right opposite the doorway. It was plain that I was followed still, as I had suspected would be the case. To lose sight of me on the chance that I had bestowed what they wanted in my rooms was not a piece of their policy. I suppose the room would keep. I had a good view of the fellow, and as I leisurely drank my wine I watched him. His squint was the most atrocious ugliness he possessed, but he was not prepossessing apart from it, and I judged that Williams was right in supposing him to be a foreigner. He had a look of a Southern nation—Portuguese or Italian, I guessed him; Greek, it might be. His color was a nasty sallow, and his nose was awry, like his eyes. Clearly I was to have an adventure for my pains, and the first thing was to run Sheppard to earth.

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When I got out into the street I was conscious that the man was behind me, and, turning quickly, confronted him. My action was so abrupt that it took him by surprise, but he took off his hat politely, and with a "Pardon, sir," in a slightly foreign accent, avoided the collision that had been imminent. I jumped into a cab and drove straight to Sheppard's rooms in Down Street. As luck would have it he was out, but it was a relief to find that he was in town. According to the maid he was to be back in the morning. In considerable disappointment I ran down the stairs and banged the front door; and there was my man across the roadway.

I confess that I began for the first time to have the feeling of being hunted. I strode over to him.

"What the devil do you want?" I asked, angrily.

"Sir!" said he, and looked up at me as if in surprise.

"What the devil do you want?" I repeated.

There was a slight pause, and with my hand in my pocket I ostentatiously cocked the revolver. The faint click caught his ear.

"I am desirous to walk about the street, sir," he said, softly. "I have made up my mind to see London by night. It is var' beautiful."

"Very well," thought I, for it was plainly of no use to deal with the rascal. "You may walk as much as you like. I am for a cab."

And into a cab again I jumped. "Drive—west—anywhere," said I at last to the questioning cabman. "I'll direct you."

I had this dilemma now before me—that I dared not go back to my rooms. The risk was too extravagant. And the question as to where I was to pass the night became important, as it was now past eleven. Of course I could go to a hotel, where I should be

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comparatively safe, but I had no fancy to spend the long hours of darkness awake and on my guard, on the chance that this scoundrel would make an attempt on my room. No; I must be rid of him first. As the cab drove off I peeped through the little window at the back, and saw my squinting friend in conversation with another man, no doubt the second of the gang.

The cab passed through Knightsbridge and towards Kensington, and then I turned the driver through the park for Bayswater. Presently I was aware of a rattling behind, and looking out through my spy-hole again, perceived a second cab close upon us.

"Very well," said I to myself. "You shall have your wish. A stern chase is a long chase, and I'm damned if you sha'n't have a run for your money."

I fancy my cabman must have thought me near upon a lunatic. I chopped and changed his directions a dozen times, and during the next two hours we visited quite half of the metropolis.

You will doubtless dub me a fool in that I didn't forthwith take the shelter of the law and put myself under safe custody. But I had two reasons against that: the one, that I had a sort of informal bargain with Sercombe not to bring the authorities into this feud, but to fight out a private war; the other, that I would see these scoundrels in the infernal regions before I surrendered to them. And when you come to think of it, to call in the police for help in the distinctly illegal job which occupied me would hardly be in taste. So there was nothing for it but the road, and the road it was for the next two hours and more. By that time my cab-horse, a fine upstanding chestnut, had fairly run himself down, and so I hoped had my pursuers' cab. But of this I could not be certain, and, in any case, it was not their object to provoke an open fracas. As I imagined, they merely sought to

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run me to earth somewhere. And it was obvious by now that I could not drive about in cabs all night.

Somewhere between one and two I found myself again in Kensington, or rather in that region of respectable, desolate, and gloomy houses lying about Gloucester Road. The chase had to end somehow. The streets were silent and vacant of any passengers, and the noise of the cab-wheels startled the quiet night. Stars twinkled in the heavens, and the cool night air blew in my face. Even the underground trains no longer rumbled between the houses. These lay in great banks, wrapped in darkness, and presenting, as it were, a parcel of the caliginous sky. A fret of nerves dashed me as the excitement of the long and weary pursuit fell away. I had only the desire to close it.

As this mood fastened on me we drove up a road dimly lighted and narrow. I suppose my cabman must have been almost as weary as I, and probably more sleepy. At any rate, I had ceased to guide him for some time; he had taken the initiative himself, constituting himself, I conceive, the guardian of this harmless lunatic. At all events, it was soon plain that we had entered a *cul-de-sac*. The situation pricked my resolution to the proper point of action. As it fell out, a flare of gas streamed from the fan-lights in a large and commodious house near the bottom of the road, seeming to show that the inmates had not yet retired; and, acting on my resolution in a second, I stopped the man and jumped out before the door. As I did so the second cab also came to a pause. My cab turned slowly round and stopped abreast of his fellow. I would swear I saw the two figures alight. God knows what the cabmen made of it all. I pulled at the bell, but for a time could get no answer; but at last, and in response to a louder peal than usual, the

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door was opened, and there confronted me a tall, slight man something near my own age in evening dress.

"Who the devil may you be?" says he, surveying me from top to toe with a puzzled look.

"Sir," said I, "this is no place upon your door-step to explain to you. But I am in immediate need of a kindly hand, and if you will have the goodness to bear with me and allow me two minutes in your private room, I make no doubt that I can satisfy you."

"Faith," said he, smiling rather foolishly, "if it is a hand you want, you must needs look for one steadier than mine."

And, true enough, there he was swaying somewhat unsteadily upon his legs, and presenting me a face flushed with the use of liquor. But this was no moment for parleying, and I pressed my point promptly.

"Then pray let me shut the door for you," said I, stepping in forthwith; and, without more ado, I closed the great door with a bang.

He led the way docilely enough into a neighboring room, and, turning up the gas, faced me. "This is all very well," says he, more soberly. "But I have still to learn who the devil you may be."

"My name, sir, is immaterial," I replied. "But it is your services I want in a certain crisis, and if you be a gentleman, as I see you are, I shall have no doubt of the issue."

He stared at me for some moments in silence. "Pray state your case," he said, politely, and sticking the stump of a cigar in his mouth, but supporting himself upon the table.

"You ask my name?" I answered. "Well, there is no concealment I would practise on you—and so it is Greatorrex, for what use you may care to make of it."

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He stared unsteadily, shifting the cigar from his lips.

"Mine's Winthorp," he explained. "Lord Winthorp; you may have heard of me recently—correspondent in divorce case, you know."

As a matter of fact I had not, but I bowed civilly to the introduction. "Go on," says he.

"The situation is easily settled," said I, for I saw that I need be at small pains to elaborate the story in his present condition.

"I have something of value upon me, and I have been chased by two rascals in a cab. The light was burning in your house, and so I took the liberty of asking your assistance to evade them."

"Quite right," says the young fool, taking the cigar from his mouth—"quite right. Stolen goods?" he asked, comically.

"My lord!" said I, with a smile, "if it were, do you think a thief like myself would confess it?"

He broke out laughing, and patted me on the back.

"No, I'm damned if you would," said he; "and quite right, too!" at which, and without any more ado, he beckoned me to follow, and walked in his uncertain gait across the hall and towards a farther room, from which issued a great noise of talk and laughter. Flinging the door open he strode in.

"Gentlemen," said he, "here is another guest to join us. Pray charge your glasses."

Half a dozen young gentlemen were spread about the huge room, some at a card-table, and a generous row of bottles testified to the dominant occupation of the evening. A vacuous but hearty laugh greeted this.

"I must explain to you, gentlemen," continued my host, lighting another cigar, "that Mr.—Mr. What's-his—this gentleman is engaged in the perilous task

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of escaping from a hostile armament outside. And it is our duty, I need not say, as English gentlemen, to rescue him."

A wild hooray from the party was the salutation with which this sentiment was met.

"The officers of the law, gentlemen," continued my host, pouring out a glass of spirit with an unsteady hand, "are even now at our gates, preparing to batter down the portcullis. Gentlemen, if I ask you to stand by us, shall I ask in vain?"

A unanimous negative, shouted at the ceiling, greeted his question. As a slight silence ensued, I thought it my time to venture for myself.

"In the circumstances, gentlemen—" said I, suavely.

"Circumstances be damned!" interrupted Lord Winthorp, only he did not pronounce the words quite correctly. "While I have a humble roof over my head, the needy and the criminal shall never want shelter."

"I drink to the criminal!" shouted one of the foolish young men.

Lord Winthorp turned on him sharply. "I will ask you to observe, Harry," he said, severely, "that this gentleman is my guest, and I will have him treated properly, or I'll throw you out of doors. I was saying—"

But apparently he had forgotten what he was saying, for he bit his thumb and looked somewhat stupidly at his cigar; an interval of silence ensued, which one of his companions chose to break on his own account by starting up and shouting:

"Let us go and break up the foe, Johnny."

"Gentlemen," said I, raising my voice above the din, for we should never reach the end at this rate, "the so-called foe is unworthy of your steel. I only ask permission to go forth by a back way and leave



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you to the pleasant recreation I have so rudely interrupted."

"That's true enough," said one. "I had the ace."

"If you say any more, Taunton," said my host, flinging his cigar at the speaker, "you shall have the floor."

"Let him stay and take a hand," said some one else, and a chorus of assent went up while I observed the glasses fill.

"Gentlemen," said I, with great politeness, "I should be charmed to join you in your game, but that it must be apparent to you that I am playing a bigger game to-night. The cards are all against me and I must use all my wits."

This appeal to their own sporting proclivities, and in their own patter, seemed to weigh with their drunken wits, and they agreed that I had said well.

"Lord Winthorp," said I, turning to my host, "is there a back way from your house?"

The young nobleman roused himself. "My servants tell me," said he, "that there is a garden at the back of the house, but I wouldn't swear to it. However, if you like to try, we'll light the way."

But this was not to my taste, for I was in no humor to attract my pursuers by this drunken concourse with lights.

"I think," I said, "that your silent prayers would serve me better. And if you will show me the garden I will make shift for myself; and be assured," said I, with great ceremony, "that it will remain one of the red-letter days in my life to have met so courteous a host as Lord Winthorp, and so genial a company as the present."

There was a babel of applause at this, and Lord Winthorp turned to me, putting on his very best and most sober air. "Sir," he said, bowing with great

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difficulty, "my company is always at your disposal, as is also my house apparently;" and with that he opened a door at the foot of the room, and with much elaborate bowing I was ushered out into the garden.

The garden was black and silent when the door closed upon me. I listened for a few minutes, but could hear no sound save that of laughter from the house. Then I scrambled among the bushes at the back of the house, and presently came upon a high wall. Climbing to the top of this with difficulty, I looked down upon a road, and, lowering myself softly, I dropped upon the foot-path. Right and left no one was visible, with which fact, much enheartened, I walked briskly away. I suppose I had gone about a mile among the maze of roads when I at last happened upon a hansom and drove to a hotel. No sign of my enemy was visible, and for all I knew or cared they were still watching outside Lord Winthorp's windows.

CHAPTER VIII

WE TABLE OUR CARDS

Now that I had given my pursuers the slip I was confident that I should not be at further trouble with them for the present; for once I and my parcel were out of their sight for any space of time there could be little doubt in their minds that I would accept the chance to dispose of it. But, as a matter of fact, I did nothing of the kind. The document would be of little use deposited in some London safe; it might be of considerable value down at the castle. I still hugged my secret in my pocket, and hugging it, set out next morning to find Sheppard. I caught him upon his return about mid-day, and opened the situation to him over lunch. It did me good to see his eyes sparkle at the recitation.

"Why, this is the seventeenth century at least, Ned," said he, in his excitement. "A treasure, buccaneers, and a high-handed, murderous gang! Do I stand on my head or my heels?" and he smacked his thigh in sheer joyousness.

"This is well enough," I replied, "but you forget that it is no child's play. This is mighty serious, if I have a notion of the men, and we must face the case pretty brazenly and boldly if we decide to go forward."

He sprang from his chair. "My dear fellow, you amaze me," said he. "You talk in this dubious way about going forward, with an adventure like this

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ahead! If you cock a white feather, my good Ned, I will take the place off your hands and carry on the game on my own account. "That's my feeling."

"So far, good," said I. "I wanted to be quite open with you, and, as for that, between you and me I have every intention of sticking to it. But this is the least part of the matter. We can make up our minds to go on, but what *is* going on?"

Sheppard picked up a time-table. "Imprimis," said he, "to catch the 3.45 train to Raymond. If you'll drive straight to your rooms I'll meet you at Paddington."

His enthusiasm warmed me, for, to say the truth, I had enjoyed a surfeit of the adventurous the night before, and was feeling somewhat flat. When I got to the station he was as good as his word, and, stimulated by his high spirits, I entered busily into possible plans, in which occupation we passed most of the journey.

The twenty-four hours had passed uneventfully at the castle, but I found Montgomery on the watch and very eager. He had armed himself with a shot-gun, which he dragged about with him very ostentatiously, and indeed I had some ado to prevent him sitting down to dinner with it. Sheppard had been informed of his presence, and the two promised to be capital friends. Sheppard always had a way direct to the heart of new acquaintances, and, with his indomitable gayety and his impulsive energy, was exceedingly attractive to Montgomery. I myself was used with sincere respect, tempered by a little awe; but the boy showed immediate signs of a positive affection for Sheppard, which fell out excellently, since harmony was essential to so small a party of defenders.

That evening we held a council of war. And, first,

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Montgomery must be initiated into the mystery. The bare facts took away his breath and inspired him apparently more with a desire for bloodshed than for the treasure itself. I believe he would have been enthusiastic if we had been defending a waste-paper basket. It was only the pretext he required. He renewed his protestations of fidelity with a bashful eye on me, and said, warmly :

"I can tell you this, Mr. Sheppard, that if I sight either of the scoundrels within shooting-range I'll empty both barrels into them on the off chance. And of that I'll give 'em warning."

"Bravo !" said Sheppard, slapping him on the back and smiling his pleasant smile. "You're the man for my money, old cock !"

"And now," I resumed, "we are brought front to front with affairs. We have half the paper. How are we to get possession of the other ?"

"It is plain enough," said Sheppard, "that one of those fellows, Sercombe or Hood, has it — Hood for choice—and a damned pretty scoundrel he must be, from all you say of him. And so we may take it that we know where it is."

"Well ! that hardly gets us far," I remarked, dryly.

"Let us look at the paper," said Sheppard, and I unrolled the parchment on the table, while the three of us poured over it industriously.

"Any chance of hitting upon the place without the document ?" asked Sheppard, presently.

"You might as well hunt a haystack for a pin as go through the possible secrets of this house," said I.

"Ah," said Sheppard, "you must remember that I haven't explored this heritage of yours yet ; but, by God's grace, I will do so to-morrow ; moreover, I think we had better sleep on this question also," he observed, thoughtfully.

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"I have slept on it for some days now," I reminded him.

"Oh! well, we have three wits to work now," he answered, airily; "and in the mean time you must introduce me to your friend, Hood. I have a fancy for Hood."

As it fell out he had an earlier chance of the acquaintance than either of us anticipated, and this was how it happened, and how the whole face of the position underwent a sudden change.

Shortly after breakfast on the following morning the maid brought me word that Captain Sercombe was in the library and begged to see me. Although I was prepared for a piece of insolence from the man, and might indeed look for it after our indefinite compact, the news thrilled me with a pleasant emotion of anger. I was too near, you see, to the attempt made upon me by his creatures.

"Here is a pretty piece of impudence," said Sheppard, smiling. "Confound the man, but I like him! By all means let us have him up."

He looked at me. "Not at all," said I; "but since there is nothing to steal in the library save some hundreds of musty volumes, let him wait upon our pleasure."

"And my toe," growled Montgomery, assuming a ferocious expression.

"No, no, my dear lad," said Sheppard, with his gentle and insinuating smile; "you are too forward, too precocious in your arguments. Let us bag the captain, whom, I confess, I am dying to see well basted; but let it be by more diplomatic processes. We are all scoundrels together, you forget. That fourteen-inch boot of yours will keep; though, if the signs be true, you will have work yet, if not for your shot-gun, ere we have done with this

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business. Come, Greatorrex, give the signal when you are ready. I *must* confront this Bombastes."

"Very well; come on," said I, rising; for, to say the truth, I was curious to know the man's business with me. We descended in file into the library. Sercombe, who was staring out of the window and curling his mustache with an air of abstraction, turned rapidly, and putting his heels together, gave me a military bow.

"Ah! here is my young friend of the claret," he exclaimed, lightly, nodding briefly to Montgomery, who fixed a stolid and somewhat glowering glance upon him. Then his eye fell on Sheppard, whom he observed with dispassionate curiosity.

"I was in hopes to have met you alone, Mr. Greatorrex," with a little hesitation showing in his voice.

"These are my friends," said I, "from whom I have no secrets."

"Allow me to introduce myself," said Sheppard, politely, stepping forward, "since Mr. Greatorrex has overlooked the formality. Reginald Sheppard, Captain Sercombe—a gentleman, as I hope, but of no occupation and a vast deal of ambition, who is proud to make the acquaintance of so notorious a free companion as yourself."

Sercombe stared, somewhat discomposed by this deliverance, but recovering himself, smiled genially. "The pride, sir, is on my side, to encounter so pleasant a gentleman." Then he looked at me. "I take it, Mr. Greatorrex, that I may state my business here."

"By all means," I answered, curtly, "and the sooner the better."

"I wish no delay on my part," said he, in his turn.

"We are always glad of your company, Captain Sercombe," said Sheppard, with his pleasant impudence.

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"Damn it !" said the captain, gayly, "I believe you and I would get on very well together."

"I have not a doubt of it," says Sheppard, bowing.

The captain turned to me, assuming a more sober air. "To be brief, Mr. Greatorex," he said, "I have come to strike a bargain with you."

"You will observe," I answered, "that we have no police in the castle."

He waved his hand impatiently. "I will confess that so far you have out-manœuvred us. I will go so far as to say that I thought I had you cornered yesterday. Yesterday morning I would not have put two crowns upon your appearance in the race. But you have sharp eyes, sir, and I make you a present of the compliment. You are a sharper man than I had reckoned, and there you are. But upon the other hand, where do you stand? I ask you to consider that. And what price do you put on your chances? You have, I should guess, about as much chance to lay your hands on what you want as I have. Is that so?"

"I am not here to discuss my chances with you, but to listen to you, sir," said I. "What have you to say?"

He made a slight grimace, delivering it instinctively to Sheppard, and went on: "Well, I suppose what *you* have to say will keep. What *I* have won't, if we are either of us to get any further. We stand upon equal terms now, Mr. Greatorex, as you will see; but those terms are impracticable. You have only one-half of a secret and we have the other; and it will take a cleverer man than you to find our half, as I make no doubt you also have yours in pretty safe hiding. I don't reckon to hunt London for a piece of paper. But this brings me to my point. Let us show our hands. Let me see what you have

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in yours, and I give you the word of a gentleman you shall see all mine."

He paused and interrogated me a moment silently.

"Since the captain gives his word as a gentleman," put in Sheppard's suave voice, "I think we stand on safe ground. For my part, I am quite willing to give mine as a burglar."

Sercombe flashed a glance of annoyance at him.

"Will you be more explicit?" said I.

"I thought you took me," said he; "it's plain enough. Let us piece the document together, read it, and start fair on the knowledge. That places us again on equal terms, only with this difference: that the best man wins. Whereas now a man may be Satan himself and fail till the crack of doom."

Sheppard threw an eager glance at me, and I read assent in it. Nor was I indisposed to agree to the proposal, odd and unexpected as it came, and involving us, as I foresaw, in all the outrages of actual warfare. Yet upon so pregnant a proposition I dared not make up my mind on the instant, and I suppose the man saw this, for, turning, he moved to the windows again and looked out upon the lawns, humming to himself. I revolved the possibilities swiftly. I knew that in taking this decision, if I were to take it, I should be altering the whole face of our campaign, and maybe plunging ourselves into the horrid facts of tragedy. And yet ere he had turned again and faced me with his question in his eyes I had made up my mind.

"I agree," I said.

Sheppard whistled softly, and, as if imitating the captain, leaned forth upon the window. A light of satisfaction played in Sercombe's gray-green eyes for an instant. As for Montgomery, I do not suppose that he had any clear notion of what it was all about.

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"Then," said Sercombe, "the sooner the better, and what time better than to-day?"

"I agree to to-day," I replied.

"Good; and now there remains only the place and time," said he.

"I have no wish to have my head broken," said I, bluffly, "or to be mistaken for a hare; and so I say the castle. If you grant that, you may fix your own time."

"I was in hopes," he said, smiling, for he took no offence at my plainness of speech, "that we might have settled the matter over a little dinner. Hood, an excellent host, I find, is anxious to show you what The Woodman can do when he spreads himself. And a full stomach, warmed with wine, is better for business, as my young friend here knows. But you shall have it your own way."

"By all means let it be a dinner," said Sheppard, suddenly springing up from his seat. "Mr. Greatorex, I am sure, would be loath to rob you of your pleasure, Captain Sercombe; and in his name I make bold to offer you the hospitality of the castle."

I started in amazement and opened my mouth to refuse, but was saved the trouble by the captain's answer. He was a good deal disconcerted.

"I fear," said he, "that the hospitality would be reluctant on Mr. Greatorex's part."

"Not at all," said I, graciously. "A distinguished soldier like Captain Sercombe is always welcome to my house."

He hesitated, and then, coloring slightly, "I am not alone," said he.

Sheppard shot me a glance of triumph, as who would say, "I thought we should corner him."

"No doubt, Mr. Greatorex would gladly entertain the other gentleman," he suggested.

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The captain looked at him, and a grin spread slowly over his features. "No, by Heaven!" he said, "but, with Mr. Greatorrex's permission, the other gentleman shall entertain us."

"I fancy," he continued, smiling, "that Hood is not a stranger to the castle ways, and he makes a good waiter."

The idea tickled me. "Let us have Hood, by all means," I said. "I had an excellent character for him from Mr. Kesteven."

"I will bring Hood," said the captain, gravely, and taking up his hat, made to go. It was odd, indeed, but over that small jest we had somehow approached a kind of familiarity; and it struck me even afterwards, I remember, as strange that the distinction of class, which one would suppose had disappeared in this dirty companionship, should still persist so strongly as to make a shameless fellow like Sercombe shrink from placing his associate at table with gentlemen, and to unite us all in a common fellowship against the inferior. As it was, Sheppard held the door while Sercombe retired, which he did on good terms with himself, and in an air of general good-humor.

The dinner was set for seven o'clock, and I fancy that all three looked forward to it with considerable expectation. Sercombe arrived punctual to the hour, and a little later I entered the morning-room to meet him. He sat in a chair, lounging very cosily, a light overcoat covering his evening dress, and by his side stood Hood, also in the orthodox costume, and looking, as I could not help noticing, uncommonly spruce and servant-like.

"I am here, Mr. Greatorrex, to the moment," said Sercombe, in his leisurely voice, "and I go bail that I have brought you an invaluable ally. With your permission, Hood will now retire to the kitchen."

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The innkeeper insensibly straightened himself, standing to attention like a graven image, and I signed my assent.

"This is entirely your affair, Captain Sercombe," said I, "and you may do what you like with your own property." I turned to Hood: "You will find Mrs. Main in the servants' hall," I said.

With his gliding, serpentine tread Hood made a motion of respect, and vanished. Sercombe stared after him, meditating, and gnawed his mustache with a frown, which seemed to me to indicate a certain touch of perplexity. But he brightened at once, and talked very freely and in his old manner till dinner was served. The interior significance of our dinner-party would not have been visible to a stranger. We might have been comfortable and friendly acquaintances chatting upon the ordinary topics of life. A slight constraint held me quiet for some time, and Montgomery too at first was hardly at ease with his circumstances; but very soon the extreme affability and suavity of our guest and of Sheppard wore these feelings away. Sheppard and he were well-matched in a way, and in truth it was not difficult to perceive that in some respects Sheppard was his superior in the game we were playing. He met him on his own ground, adapting his course of behavior with the most rapid intuition of the man's cast and temperament. For the main part, that preliminary skirmish was occupied by conversation the most distant from the subject we all had at heart. It was Sercombe himself who set the example of reserve, and we followed meekly enough. When I say reserve, I am thinking only of one particular point; for Heaven knows that his talk was sufficiently frank upon other topics. Slowly a remarkable character seemed to be evolved before me, out of these rambling and inconsequent ex-

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changes. The man appeared to the best advantage, shameless as he undoubtedly was, and shameless as he tacitly confessed himself. He had not wholly abrogated the high dignity of gentility, which serves, as it were, for a natural medium in which human lives may meet and transact their relations upon equal terms. I had the best of reasons not to mistake him for anything but an unscrupulous scoundrel; nor had he much polish; but for all that he bore himself very well, and, I believe, raised our estimate of him. It was amusing to note the indifference with which he led the talk away to inoffensive matters; and wonderful also to observe him presently catch the interest of his audience, not one of whom, unless it was Sheppard, but was animated with hostility against him. As I had occasion to take note now and subsequently, the man was by nature framed for a good talker, and although he had every prejudice against him, and started, so to speak, with a great handicap, he soon wore down the feelings with which we embarked upon the entertainment. And it was not until we had broached a sort of good-fellowship, and the evening was far spent, that anything happened to mar our growing harmony.

It fell out thus: Sercombe himself had just concluded an amusing narrative of his experiences among the brigands of Calabria, and Sheppard resumed the conversation with an adventure of his own. The evening had fallen dark and cloudy, and amid the starlike candles that illumined the room the dark figure of Hood moved noiselessly and constantly. I had heard this story of Sheppard's, which, indeed, was not very exciting, and my mind, swaying from its polite duty, rested unconsciously upon the new inn-keeper. He gave me a distinct impression, but of what I could hardly determine. His eyes shifted as

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swiftly as his feet, and the directions of his lean body were unerring—as unerring as was the perfect immobility of his face. The sensation I took was almost that of a dog upon the sleuth—so agile, alert, and cunning were his physical qualifications. And yet there was something more than this in Hood—some mental characteristic to be imposed upon these others. Was it the appearance of treachery that was current in the very facts of his life, that breathed from his faultless actions? As I watched him I saw the two men exchange glances—an interrogating look upon Sercombe's part, a baffling and inscrutable look from Hood. There followed an instant's pause, and then the man approached the master with the pretext of a dish. Sercombe spoke low, and across his shoulder, nervously exploring the contents of the dish with a spoon. Hood said nothing, and raising his eyes, softly fixed them upon me at the other end of the table. For a moment we regarded each other luminously, and then his glance fell politely away. Sercombe still whispered, and, I thought, with a growing anxiety. It was time for me to interfere.

"Captain Sercombe," I cried, sharply, breaking upon the tail of Sheppard's yarn, "these communications are not included in the compact, and I must beg to remind you that we cannot permit them."

The captain started, and his face reddened deeper, but he was always a cool hand, and he recovered his self-possession at once.

"I must ask you to remember, Mr. Greateorex," said he, suavely, "that I am your guest."

"That is true," said Sheppard, nodding his head, while I felt confusion warming me to my ears.

Sercombe looked at me with some asperity.

"I think, sir," said he, "that in the circumstances

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you will see that you have overstepped the privileges of gentlemen."

"The word is hardly in the case. I think we are agreed that it is as thieves we meet," interjected Sheppard, smoothly.

"You are right, Captain Sercombe," I answered, being in my turn in command of myself, "and I offer you my apology for the rudeness. But I am at least the master of my own servants, and Hood shall keep his distance, and not hang about annoying my guests." With which I ordered him forthwith to the window—a command which he hastened to obey almost by anticipation.

I must say that this unpleasant episode at once changed the atmosphere of the room. On the whole, I did not regret this, as I conceived that we had perhaps reached the proper term of our familiarity with Sercombe. It was strange to see the instant revolution in our mutual attitudes. Whether Sercombe himself had been as easy as he had previously seemed, or whether he had acted a part for our benefit, I cannot say, but it is certain that now he was charged with anxiety. Now and again his eyes, puffed and blood-shot, flickered uneasily on Hood, where the man stood in his corner, a memorial of black sobriety, and his demeanor was carefully under restraint. It was as though we had in a moment awakened to the sense of our antagonism, and from telling tales over wine were come to confront each other with hostile eyes. The situation became a little disagreeable, and I thought the time had arrived to end it.

"Captain Sercombe," I said, quite formally, "I fancy our dinner, such as it is, is over, and, if you will take no more wine, perhaps we had better get to business."

"Certainly, sir," said the captain, cheerfully, and draining his glass. "I am at your service."

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I looked at Hood. "It is time now," said I, "that we were alone," and I waited to see the man move.

A quick exchange of glances took place between them, and then the innkeeper turned his back on us and busied himself with the plates upon the side-board.

Sercombe colored angrily, and was visibly disconcerted. "I beg your pardon, sir," said he, with a slight stammer, "but I have already had the honor of informing you that I am not alone in this matter."

"Really," said Sheppard, gently, "I do not think we can invite our servants to discuss this matter with us."

Sercombe bit his lip, and, after a glance at Hood, who still kept his attitude, "I understand your feeling, gentlemen," he replied, "and, in fact, I sympathize with it. But—"

He hesitated, and I began to perceive for the first time how far he was involved with the other, and to what extent he was under his control. It was evident that he was chagrined by his position, and the look he directed at Hood, who was still, to all appearances, unconscious of our controversy, was informed with dislike.

"Leave the room, Hood," said I; not that I had any certain intention that he should quit us, but rather out of a curiosity as to what would ensue. The issue surprised me. Hood turned obediently on his heel and made for the door. As it closed upon him, Sercombe turned to us and broke out with embarrassment:

"You are right, gentlemen; I agree with you. These things are better managed between gentlemen. But—" His perplexities struggled in evidence upon his face; yet he had an uncommon gift of recovering himself, which I had had occasion already to admire,

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and I was to admire him still more at this moment. "You will perceive, Mr. Greatorex," he said, abruptly, but with a sudden suavity of voice, "that, as you have just pronounced, we have concluded our friendly dinner, and it is to business that we turn. I take it, therefore, that we are no longer here in the capacity of hosts and guests."

"True," said I.

"Then," he exclaimed, triumphantly, "Hood, I take it, is no longer a servant."

"Captain Sercombe is right," said Sheppard, promptly, turning to me, "and, by your leave, Ned, I will ring and have him up."

"I accept your theory," I answered. "Let us have him up, certainly."

Sheppard rose, and, when the man returned, ushered him with some ceremony to the table. "A chair for Mr. Hood," he said. "Where will you sit, Mr. Hood—by the captain? That's right. Please make yourself comfortable. We have just enjoyed an excellent dinner, very well served, Mr. Hood, but I fear you are too late. Montgomery, a glass of wine for Mr. Hood; business is business, and I never conduct a piece without the usual sherry."

If this elaborate irony disturbed Sercombe, as it seemed to do, it had no effect upon Hood.

"Thank you, sir. I will stand, sir. No wine, thank you, sir." Such was his brief reception of the courtesies.

He assumed a place at the back of the captain, commanding a view of the table. Sercombe spread his hands upon the table.

"Gentlemen, let us show our cards," he said.

There was a momentary silence, and then I was conscious of a slight bustle of excitement that stirred the room into sound. Sheppard looked at me, and Mont-

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gomery's gaze was riveted upon the captain. Shepard coughed gently, and sipped his wine.

"That is a very proper demand, Captain Sercombe," I said, "seeing that it is what we are here for ; but I hardly yet see my way clear to table all my tricks. Let us understand one another better."

The captain did not color, as he might well have colored under this implicit distrust. As I have said, he was singular in the partial hold he kept upon his gentility. Instead, he laughed, but somewhat awkwardly.

"I see," he answered, and looked down at his hands, appearing to consider. He lifted a big and somewhat clumsy hand and scratched his swollen cheek, smoothing a long wisp of red hair across his naked crown. "I cannot pretend to misunderstand you," he declared, at last, and shot a glance aside at Hood, who had fallen slightly away from the table and stood intently watching the scene. "But I think it is somewhat unnecessary, Mr. Greator,ex," he said, again very awkwardly ; and he laughed shortly, and again his eyes flew to Hood, directing at him, as it seemed to me in that light, a glance of warning, of appeal, even of fear.

"No doubt," said I, in return ; "but you must remember that I have already had experience of your possibilities. But come ; we shall get no further unless we can strike a compromise. If you will produce your fragment of the document—"

"You assume that I have it," he broke in, with his discordant laugh. "You are taking a good deal for granted."

"I assume nothing," said I. "Do not let us bandy words."

Sercombe lifted the decanter which stood at his elbow, and filled his glass with a hand that shook. He

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drained it at a draught and turned to Hood. The inn-keeper glided to his chair, and something passed from hand to hand. Sercombe put the torn fragment upon the table before him. He looked at me, as if inviting me to a similar demonstration. We were to proceed by moves, then.

"I have no evidence that this is the document," I objected.

"Nor I, in your case," he retorted.

"Very well," I assented, "we will take it point by point, but I fear we shall find it a tedious job."

I drew the paper from my pocket and laid it before me. At the other end of the table I could see Sercombe's green eyes bulging in his head as they fastened upon the white thing under my hand. His mouth dropped and a portion of the glow receded from his face. Montgomery stared. A tense feeling stiffened the attention of all. I felt my heart throb in the silence, and then suddenly there was a sharp exclamation from Sheppard, and the next instant I was conscious of a clatter and two figures struggling beside me. The affair lasted but a few seconds, and then Hood was hurled deftly back against the window, and Sheppard flung upon the floor with a crash a long Spanish dagger.

A hush fell on the room. Sercombe turned pale, and his eyes shifted uneasily. Had it been murder that was intended? If so, I could have sworn that Sercombe was no party to it.

"It appears that we can't do quite without the law," said Sheppard, placing his heel upon the weapon. Hood, breathing deeply, remained in the shadows of the window.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

Hood, black and lean, but immovable as to feature, stepped from his corner. "I beg pardon, sir," he ex-

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plained, "but I suppose the gentleman objects to my wearing it. It isn't a pretty weapon, sir, exactly; but I have found it useful, sir. I thought there would be no objection, Mr. Greatorex, sir, more especially as the gentleman here carries a revolver." He indicated Montgomery, who grew red, and stammered:

"I beg pardon. Awfully sorry. I—I—here it is," and extracting a Colt from under his waistcoat, he threw it on the table in front of me.

Sheppard and I exchanged glances.

"Come, sir," said Sercombe's voice, rising in an imperative key, "but this remarkable scene requires an explanation. Why may not Mr. Hood wear what weapon he likes?"

"Was there anything?" I asked of Sheppard, in a whisper.

He frowned in embarrassment. "To have waited for anything would have been too late," he answered, in the same tone. "I had to forestall. I guessed; but I'll swear I guessed right. I can't prove it. I caught the gleam." Then he turned quickly from me, and picking up the dagger offered it to Hood. "I am sorry for this misunderstanding, Mr. Hood," he said, sweetly. "If I had stopped to think, I should have known that a man like yourself would only carry a weapon for some good purpose. But I am a creature of impulse, full of mistakes, but of a warm heart below all; and I offer you the dagger back, in token of my trust in you," with which he sat himself down in his seat and ostentatiously played with Montgomery's revolver for the rest of the interview.

"Come, come, that is well said, and well ended," said the captain, genially, and he was evidently very much relieved at the conclusion of this scene. "And now, Mr. Greatorex, and to show that it is not both sides that are so unnecessarily suspicious, if you will

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be so good as to take this paper from me, I will trust you to read out the whole document."

This proposal, coming on the top of what had happened between us, astounded us all, as you may suppose. But Sercombe was rarely at a loss for some amazing movement, and he knew well enough that he was perfectly safe with me, whereas he was also aware that I knew I was absolutely unsafe with him. Therefore he assumed a golden air of courtesy and lofty faith, as between gentlemen. But these reflections are not to the point, for there was I, with the two parts of the precious document in my hands and four pairs of bright eyes burning upon my face with their eager interrogation. You may conjecture my emotions and the way my pulse ran. I spread the paper I had received from Sercombe upon the other, smoothed it with the back of a knife, and forthwith deciphering the following composition, read it slowly aloud to the company :

"I, Sir Ralph Vyvian, being now in my thirtieth year, and upon the eve of exile through the malicious treachery of friends, this fifteenth day of April, in the year of Our Lord, 1646, do herewith, as follows hereunder, give and proclaim to all or any of my descendants, lawfully begotten, or their heirs, the ensuing information. It being in the twentieth year of the reign of our beloved Sovereign, His Gracious Majesty, and in the fifth of the lamentable and abominable strife with the disloyal houses, I was besieged in Ivor Castle by one Colonel Morgan, attached to the army of the Houses, and more particularly to the notorious traitor Sir Thomas Fairfax. I held this castle for the King for three days and three nights, but upon the fourth day, this said fifteenth day of April, through the accursed act of traitors, the enemy hath gained

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entrance by the towers, and even now is pressing upon the garrison. And thus I set down these several facts here upon the instant of the final essay : to wit, that I being the custodian of divers cases of treasure, gold pieces, jewels, and the like, destined for His Majesty's uses, having taken counsel with my steward, and my friend Sir John Clunes, have concealed this great treasure in a privy place within the castle precincts, and do hereby deposit this said writing also in a secret hiding-place. And to whomsoever of my descendants, or their lawful heirs, this shall fall, in the event of my death or exile, I charge them to deliver the same unto His Gracious Majesty King Charles, or unto his heirs, the Sovereign Kings of this realm, as a dutiful subject, being held in trust for that purpose.

"And here is how ye shall find the treasure: If ye will descend by the stairway, in the guard-room, within the northern tower, ye will find a gallery among the donjons of the basement. Keep upon this, feeling upon the walls, until ye shall touch the corner, where the castle turneth to the south—"

Now I paused for a moment, for here the document which Sercombe had given me was ended. I cast a glance at the others as I laid it aside, and took up the other portion. Sercombe's face was appalling in its marks of greed. The vulture shone from Hood's eyes. I resumed :

"Turning this corner, it is necessary to proceed upon the western side of the castle for the space of thirty footsteps, and at the close thereof to pause and survey the walls. If ye will then determine a height of five feet from the footway, there will be hereupon disclosed a small knobbe, the which revolving will give access to a large cupboard within the



"I READ SLOWLY ALOUD TO THE COMPANY"

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wall. Observe diligently upon the back of the cupboard, and where the oaken lining adjoins the stone. Here will be a spring, the which pushing, a doorway shall open behind the cupboard, and ye shall find entrance to an interior vault. A flight of stairway leadeth—”

At this point, as you will remember, the document grew illegible, and nothing but the blur of faint characters was discernible. But we had all that was necessary in that explicit narrative of the dead cavalier, and in proof of this up jumped the captain, his green eyes shining with emotion, and—

“You will give me a copy of that, sir?” he asked, sharply.

I nodded.

“You are welcome,” I said. “If you will write I will dictate;” and forthwith, pen and paper being fetched, we proceeded upon the odd task. When we had finished he gave a look at Hood, who joined him, and the two pored over the sheet together.

Then Sercombe rose, and putting the paper in his pocket, remarked, “You see I have trusted you, Mr. Greatorrex. I take your word; and as you have now the whole document of the late Mr. Kesteven in your possession, I wish you joy of it.”

“There is one word more,” said I, sternly. “The man who stole this piece of paper from its owner is morally guilty of his death.”

“Pish!” he exclaimed, lightly, “we can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs, Mr. Greatorrex. And now I must reluctantly wish you good-bye. I owe you an excellent dinner, and, if Fortune favors me, I shall look forward to returning it. There is no need to part on bad terms.”

He held out his hand, but ere I could accept or re-

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fuse it, Sheppard sprang forward. "Allow me, captain," he said.

"Ah!" smiled Sercombe, in no way abashed by my hesitation, "it is a pity you and I are not cast for companions, Mr. Sheppard."

"At least," said Sheppard, "as scoundrels we can respect each other."

Sercombe broke out laughing, and with one glance at Hood, in which, as I thought, he appeared to offer a question, he marched out of the room. The inn-keeper followed, and Sheppard went after them, full of geniality to the last, and calling for Captain Sercombe's cloak. Out of the window I saw them pass under the dim light of the oil-lamp before the doorway, and Sheppard was still ushering them across the court-yard to the gateway of the castle.

Suddenly I heard my name called in a loud and clamant voice, and Montgomery started to his feet and threw open the window. This gave upon the court-yard from the northerly side of the castle. In an instant I recognized the cry of Sheppard, piercing shrilly through the noise and clatter of a struggle. Shouting to Montgomery to follow me, I dashed out of the room and down the staircase, almost falling upon the slippery cobble of the court-yard in my haste. As I rose, a man grappled with me, but being now strung to fighting pitch by my excited anticipations, I flung him heavily to the stones, where he lay inert; and I leaped over his body to the assistance of Sheppard.

CHAPTER IX

THE FINDING OF THE TREASURE

You will remember, if I have been explicit enough, that the entrance to the castle lay across the draw-bridge, and by way of a great stone archway running through the width of the easterly wing. This passage, which was not more than ten feet across, was in effect a vault twenty feet high and thirty feet long. It was here that the noise attracted me, and into this narrow channel I ran, breaking tumultuously upon the aggregated knot of men that seemed to struggle in the uncertain light. Stars illumined the sky very faintly, but in that passage the gloom was heavy, and I could perceive very little. As I was casting about, tossing among the swaying bodies, I saw immediately to my right the fair head of Sheppard rise, struck with the evening glow from without. Forthwith I dashed the body nearest me to the ground, and with my fist dislodged another man in front of me. Then I heard Sercombe's voice raised in angry remonstrance. I gathered nothing, neither words nor sense, from it, but, occupied merely with the physical lust of battle, drove right through the press of the mellay to Sheppard. It seemed to me then that there were dozens of people crowded within those narrow walls, but I believe, as a matter of fact, that there were only some eight of us. Sheppard rose and fell and rose again.

"Ned! Ned!" he called; and at the sound, plunging upon human bodies, I lurched and went under. A

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stampede of feet seemed to rush over me. I felt battered and bruised; the wind was all out of my lungs; but, slowly edging on my stomach towards the wall, I drew out of the press. As I did so, I heard a great dull noise—thud, thud—intervening upon the sounds of the struggle; and presently, my eyes being now accustomed to the darkness, I caught sight of Montgomery's tall form, his arms uplifted, and wielding a heavy bar of iron. The weapon fell crashing upon the bodies of the assailants.

"Bravo!" I cried, and, struggling to my feet pushed towards him.

"Turn, you fools! Curse you, turn!" said Sercombe's voice.

I was conscious then of white teeth and a grotesque screw neck that rose up before me, and even whilst I put up my hands to choke it, I felt the warm sting of a knife in my shoulder-blade. By some magical thought, dawning at the moment, I recalled Montgomery's revolver, which I carried in my breast-pocket, and producing it, I fired at the bestial form before me. There was a sharp cry, the enemy appeared to recoil, and then Montgomery's flail descended in a pitiless shower of blows. Of Sheppard there was no sign.

Seeing that the affray was turning in our favor, I sprang to the side, and opening a small doorway in the southerly drum-tower, rushed up the stairs. It was fortunate that I had made so complete a study of the castle. I found the crank I wanted, and turned the wheel, putting forward all the strength I had in my muscles. Slowly the mighty portcullis descended, shrieking as it fell. But this, as I had hoped, following upon the report of my revolver, and accompanied as it was with Montgomery's continuous and powerful blows, proved the turning-point for our enemies. As the groaning gate descended there were cries uttered

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in a foreign tongue, and a rush ensued for the gateway. Leaving the machine to revolve by its own impetus, I flew down into the archway. Sercombe stood in the light expostulating. Montgomery's weapon stretched some one flat upon the stones as I entered, and the man crawled off. I fired another chamber of the revolver aimlessly, and the flash lit up the passage, while the sound reverberated dully from the groined vault. The portcullis fell lower, and Sercombe was driven across the drawbridge by his retreating allies.

"Dead or living, they shall have him," said some one in my ear; and I beheld Sheppard, his face smeared with blood, dragging a body in his arms. Together we thrust it forth, and it lay half-way across the threshold. The portcullis dropped inexorably, and was now within a foot of the ground. The man lay under the range of its iron spikes. The wheels creaked above, and the distance shortened. Montgomery ran forward and shoved the body outward. But it still hung half-way. And then Sercombe came rapidly back, and, stooping, by a swift movement drew the inanimate form from beneath the iron spikes of the drawbridge. He said no word, but merely glanced at us, as we stood behind the grille. His face was set, and it was no longer the garrulous and amusing adventurer that we regarded.

As Sercombe's figure faded blackly into the night I turned and peered into the gloom of the archway where my companion stood.

Sheppard struck a match, and the tiny flame cast a precarious light upon the three of us. Two streaks of blood crossed Sheppard's forehead.

"First blood and first honors," he said.

Montgomery breathed like a blacksmith.

"It was a mean trick," he observed.

An acute pain struck suddenly through my should-

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er. "The foreigners use their knives aptly," I remarked.

"They do that," said Montgomery, fiercely. "One devil has pierced my stomach through."

"Let us go back to the house," I said, and setting the example, turned. Sheppard's light went out, and as the flame vanished the blue-black darkness fell like a pall again. Through the grating of the portcullis I saw what seemed a face peering at us, and I stopped. I perceived against the caliginous mass of foreground the semblance of Hood, and suddenly the apparition vanished. We walked back into the castle.

"What about this wound, Montgomery?" I asked, anxiously.

The boy stood up straight, his well-cut face severe and immobile.

"It's no wound," he rejoined. "A pin-prick."

"Oh! well; let us see," I said, carelessly.

He stripped off his shirt and coat, and a great red bulging spot met my eye below the breast. Sheppard put his fingers on it.

"That wants a bandage," he said, and meeting my eye—"no, there's nothing much in it; a nasty place, but merely superficial."

"We'll have old Toms over to-morrow," I said, decisively.

"The doctor?" queried Sheppard. "But what about—"

"Oh! I dare say we can compose some sort of lie. Besides, as a medical man, our confidences are sacred."

"That's true," said Sheppard, and a little silence fell between us. "Well," he resumed, presently, "can we sleep, do you think?"

"I think we are likely to have a lively night," I answered; "and for me, I am in no mood for bed."

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"Nor I," declared Montgomery.

"Very good," says Sheppard. "Then what about this treasure?"

"Precisely what I was thinking," I said.

"Let us see the papers," said he.

"Oh! I have them burning in my mind," I answered. "And if all are agreeable, we may take a lantern. They won't trouble us just yet."

But just at that moment came a knock at the door, and Mrs. Main showed in the open doorway, wearing a face of alarm. The noise (no doubt the revolver) had aroused her in her first sleep, and she begged to know what had happened.

"Mr. Montgomery's pistol went off by accident," said Sheppard, promptly. Mrs. Main apologized, breathed her fears, which were now dissipated, and retired. We looked at one another.

"I think we shall have to square the old lady or get rid of her," I observed.

"Leave that to me," says Sheppard, cheerfully. "I think you said that she was attached to old Kesteven. If that be so, I can deal with her if I know anything of physiognomy."

"You are welcome," I said, smiling. "It's not a job I fancy myself, being somewhat acquainted with Mrs. Main's loquacity."

"I don't fear it," said Sheppard, airily, "you forget, Ned, that I have been a candidate for Parliament."

"Well, come along," said I, and seizing the lantern, I stepped out into the court-yard, and made for the entrance to the northerly drum-tower.

Sheppard broke a jest or two at the entrance as we stumbled up the stairs, but once we were in the passage and had descended into the basement a deep silence enveloped us. The corridor rang with our feet, and the great slabs of stones were damp, to be

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felt even through our boots. It was plainly to be seen that some flow of water had access to this subterranean foundation. As we proceeded on the way I noticed that now and then a narrow passage branched off to the right, and on each occasion, at the farther end, I caught the soft glow of the external lights of the night. From this I gathered that the chambers we were passing (whatever was the use to which they had been put), were cut off by exiguous channels to the outer wall of the castle, and breasted by gratings upon the moat. One of these passages we explored, and by peering through the grating, set with heavy iron bars, we were able to perceive that the floor of the sepulchral corridor was buried some feet below the level of the moat itself; for the gratings stood high above our heads, and were only reached by climbing. I assumed that they stood just above the proper level of the water.

We were now, we judged, upon the western face of the castle; that is to say, upon the back parts which looked upon the park of trees and the brook behind, where the hill (or Pitch, as it was called) rose in a thicket to its uttermost summit. We had twice turned at right angles, and, pausing, consulted the document once again for the sake of certainty. We had now to proceed some thirty paces. You can conceive that at this point in our course our nerves were raised to a high pitch. Once Sheppard stopped, and laid a rough hand on my arm.

"What is it?" I said.

"Did you hear anything?" he whispered. Montgomery came close to us, and drew the revolver which he had recovered from me. We were opposite one of the short passages I have already described. Sheppard cautiously descended it, and stood beneath the grating; then he returned.

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"No," he said; "it is only the wind. There is a roaring through the park. The wind has got up." We resumed our procession, and suddenly I stopped.

"The wall," said Sheppard, who had the paper by heart as well as myself, and forthwith set to fingering upon the right hand.

"There is no doorway here," he observed, in a low voice, "and yet this should be a chamber such as we have passed already."

"Five feet from the ground," I said, in equally low tones; "that is what it says."

I cannot say what were the strange accidents of human emotion that drove us into this mysterious and solemn mode of speech, but I think the air and silence of those long-forgotten chambers had entered unconsciously into our blood. Montgomery was plainly awed.

"Is it here?" he whispered.

Sheppard gave vent to an exclamation. "Got it," he said, sharply. "Throw the light this way."

I moved the lantern forward, and sure enough there under Sheppard's hand stood out a round iron knob or handle in the huge masonry.

"Press," said I.

"No; turn," said he.

Nothing ensued upon his action. "Let Montgomery try," I suggested.

The boy stepped forward and wrenched at the knob.

"It's stiff with rust of centuries, but it's set in iron," said Sheppard. "We shall want oil."

"Oil be hanged!" said Montgomery. "I'll do this or die."

He swung, doubling on himself, and the veins jumped in his forehead.

"You will move your wound," I protested. Montgomery said nothing, but renewed his exertions, and

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with a creak the knob turned, and a gap grew in the wall.

"Hurrah!" said Sheppard, his voice ricochetting down the musty corridor.

"Hush!" I enjoined; "pull it open." The two tore back the cupboard door, and my lantern flashed on an appalling space of blackness.

"There is nothing here," said Montgomery, in a voice pregnant with chagrin.

"We're not finished, you duffer," said Sheppard, eagerly. "Feel along the back wall. Here, let me. Oh, the devil! I'm too short."

Thrusting the lantern into Sheppard's hands, I sprang at the wall, and with a leap seated myself on the floor of the cupboard.

"The back is wooden," I said. My fingers ran swiftly across the oaken surface, and presently stopped. "The lantern," I called to him.

Sheppard let the lantern fall in his excitement, and in a moment we were plunged in darkness. At the same time there arose a sound on the grim silence of the corridor. I drew in my breath, and I think every one did the same. I felt rather than heard Montgomery fumbling with his revolver. Ten—twenty—thirty seconds passed, and then Sheppard struck a match.

"It's the infernal wind," he exclaimed.

The light flared in his face as he relit the lantern, and I noticed that it was wild and burning. With tremulous fingers he handed me the lantern, and the light shone on a bit of steel I held under my thumb. I pressed, and with a jerk the oaken screen fell back. Beyond lay an unfathomable blackness, from which a faint and indescribable smell of dampness arose. It seemed like digging up a dead century from its grave. I put out a hand and encountered nothing.

"I'm going through," I said, in a whisper. "Follow

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me. I'll leave the lantern here. Heaven knows what we shall find."

I let myself softly down below, and my feet struck the stone of the floor once more. Sheppard and Montgomery followed. We cast the light about us. We were in a dungeon closed within absolutely blank walls. In the corner some rags and paper lay heaped. I pushed them aside, and they crumbled at the touch of my foot. Below, a few bones showed, glimmering white in the candle-light.

"Ugh!" I said, involuntarily.

"It's not here," said Sheppard. "Throw the light this way. Ah! I thought so."

Ere he had finished he was half-way up a flight of stone steps, and we followed pell-mell. A door of heavy oak barred the way at the top.

"We wanted oil, after all," said Sheppard, impatiently. Montgomery flung his weight against it, and with a crash it opened.

Montgomery, overbalanced with his effort, staggered and fell upon the threshold; but Sheppard, who was next to him, paid no attention, and, turning, looked at me. The light made no way upon the great darkness. To me, with the candle's flaring light before me, the place was one vast shroud of blackness.

"Do you know where we are?" whispered Sheppard. "This is below the keep."

Montgomery, crawling upon the floor, coughed and spluttered. The dust of centuries lay gathered there. The airlessness of that dreary, dismal place affected me strangely.

"Shall we go in?" asked Sheppard, with a curious panting of his breath.

"Certainly," I said, "get Montgomery up." He pulled the lad to his feet, and slowly we shoved back the huge creaking door.

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The chamber into which we were now come was small and square, and, like that below, barred by solid masonry and unrelieved by window or grating. I found later by calculation that this must be in the very heart of the keep itself, and so wholly disparted from the rest of the castle that the noise of ordnance would scarce have penetrated its deep and dismal recesses. God pity the unfortunate creature to whom those four walls should be allotted for a dungeon. The atmosphere of the room spelled dungeon to me, and spelled torture, moreover. I could watch in my fancy the hideous transactions of history behind that gate. But you may suppose that these reflections were not current in my mind at this time. My eyes were drawn as by a magnet to the farther corner of the barren cell, in which I could perceive some formidable shadows wavering beneath the dull uncertain light of my lantern.

Sheppard also had descried them, and plunging forward with a cry, flung himself upon his knees.

"They are here right enough," he called; and at his words Montgomery and I approached him. I held the light above his head, throwing the faint beams across his shoulder. There were three large oaken cases standing upon legs, and simply carved upon the face. The dust lay deep on them as upon the floor of that interior dungeon. Sheppard brushed the dust away and seized the lock. It is possible that the passage of so many generations had worn the hinges out of their usefulness; or it may be that Sir Ralph Vyvian had been careless as to the trifle of a key in so secure and fast a hiding-place. Whatever was the reason, the hinge fell back to Sheppard's touch, and slowly he lifted the massive lid.

The light shone still upon dark shadows, but stooping a little lower, I thrust it into the mouth of the



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aperture, and our noses hung over the sides of the box together.

The treasure was there for certain. There it lay, spread before our greedy faces, the gold and the silver and the precious stones that had been destined to save one king from death and another from exile. I let the pieces slip through my fingers—guineas, moidores, circlets of gold and silver, amulets, and all the material gems of the market. Touched by strange fancies, I could see now marching before my eyes the heroic figure of the gallant knight, as he turned from the chamber in which he had deposited the riches that were to preserve his royal master. On the threshold of the door he paused, his tall frame towering in the torchlight, and cast one backward glance to see that all was well. A little later, and I saw him encounter the enemy. They had gained access to the courtyard, and the fight was raging upon the southern wing—that wing which the ruins of two centuries and more had covered with the glory of picturesque decay. It was at the head of his men-at-arms I caught sight of him, and then—he was down, and the grim Puritan was the master of the castle.

I cannot tell you how these unwonted and unexpected thoughts stirred me as I knelt there beside those coffers of gold. But I think that something attuned the spirits of all three to a finer issue than the mere gross lust of money which had hitherto swayed us. The spell was only broken by Montgomery, who naturally regained his normal cheerfulness before Sheppard and myself.

“How much is there?” he asked, very practically.

Sheppard seemed to ponder, measuring rudely with his finger and computing the superficial area of the boxes.

“No one can say off-hand,” said he, “for there are

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the jewels, for one thing, among which are rubies. Now rubies of that size" (and he pounced upon one) "are worth little short of a thousand pounds."

Montgomery gaped and whistled, "Let us make a rough shot, and put the box at fifty thousand pounds. Come, I'll take a bet that it's under the mark."

"Then there are the other two," said I.

"True," said Sheppard. We all looked at one another, and a smile dawning upon our faces grew swiftly into a peal of laughter.

"Why did you laugh, Ned?" asked Sheppard, slapping me on the arm.

"I don't know," I answered. "Oh, drop that, or you'll have the candle over."

"Well, I could offer a pretty shrewd guess why we all laughed," says he.

"Come, boys," I said, rising, "let us get out of this. We know our way now, and the treasure cannot take itself wings."

Reluctantly they obeyed, and we retraced our steps through the cupboard into the corridor, and thence upward through the court-yard and into the living-rooms. The dawn was brightening the eastern skies. I pulled out my watch.

"After three," I said; "you'd better go to bed; there will be nothing happen now."

"Three o'clock!" echoed Sheppard, indignantly. "Why, it is the very time for attacks and surprises. No, I'll see it out now."

"Very well," I assented, "and perhaps a glass of something would not come amiss."

The whiskey stood upon the sideboard, and I poured out a draught. "Come now, lads," I went on; "we've got to arrange our defence, and as you are all determined not to go to bed, we may as well hold a council of war."

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"Agreed," said they; and we sat down to the job without further ado. We were agreed to consider five in the morning as the break of day for our purposes, and we were hardly exposed to an assault before eight in the evening. The sky was still luminous at that hour. It was therefore plain that we must set a guard upon those intermediate and nocturnal hours. From eight till five was a space of nine hours; that was to determine for us a watch of three. So far we settled the preliminaries of our defences. But we had now to consider further. The drum-towers commanded the slopes of the valley like two tall sentinels, and from the embrasure of the windows a watch might be kept upon the nether parts of the Gwent. But from one so stationed the back of the park and the crown of the hill behind were quite concealed. In this connection it appeared that the keep would best serve us, more particularly as the upper chambers were readily gained from the inhabited wing of the castle, whereas the towers reared their formidable heads in isolation, and led only to the corridors of the basement and to the battlements above. It was in the keep, then, that our sentinel must hold his silent watch. The highest chamber in the keep rose immediately above the level of the battlements, and was pierced by narrow slits in the masonry. This was a convenient station; or, better still, the roof of the tower, with which a flight of stairs connected the chamber.

We explored the keep thoroughly ere we had settled this point, and by that time it was four o'clock.

"Now you had better go and lie down," said I to the others, "otherwise you will be nodding on your watches to-night. For my part, there is an hour yet to the time of safety, and I take first watch."

Sheppard expostulated with me for what he termed

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unnecessary precaution, but I held to my point, and presently they left me. Leaning upon the low wall that ran round the coping of the tower, I faced down the valley and across the castle. The two drum-towers showed black against the rising sun. Mists hung thickly in the shadows of the great wood below. Peaks and the projecting masses of the hills upon either hand threw shapes of darkness across the Gwent. Behind me the summit of the Pitch, upon which the castle stood, gleamed bright in these early rays. There was no sign of living creature upon the roads. Drawing up the seat which I had secured, I sat down with my elbows on the parapet, and fell to thinking.

CHAPTER X

WE PREPARE OUR DEFENCES

WHEN I descended into the house I had hit upon one line of defence at least, and I at once proceeded to realize it. As I walked from the drawbridge along the moat to the back of the castle I wondered if it was practicable; but remembering what old Kesteven had said of his predecessor's experiment some forty years before, I had great hopes that the sluices would still work. The brook ran, as you will remember, behind the castle, at a little distance from it, and I found without difficulty the mouth of the conduit which had been formerly used to feed the fosse. I inserted my arm as far as possible, and the space seemed fairly clear, though the earth had crept in and lay along the bottom, grown with grass to the depth of some inches. Still, I had no fear that the flow of water would not wash this sediment away, provided always I could get the sluices up. To find these sluices was my next thought. I moved along the turf in the direction in which it seemed that the culvert must run, scrutinizing very carefully every inch of the ground. About three feet from the stream was a noticeable elevation, a grass-plot rising in a mound two feet high. Here was obviously what I wanted, and so, taking a spade, I dug with a will, and soon had the turf removed, and the floor of a stone erection laid bare. It was a good hour's work ere I had cleared the rubbish away sufficiently to free the sluices; then I laid hands on

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them, and pulled vigorously but fruitlessly. I must plainly have assistance; and accordingly, well enough content with my labors so far, I went back to the house. At breakfast I revealed my scheme, much to the delight of Sheppard, who roundly declared that he would give five years of his life for this adventure. Supported by two enthusiastic assistants, I returned to work, fetching with me a heavy iron bar for use as a lever. Inserting this, we all hung upon the handle, and were relieved to feel the sluice giving in its stone framework.

"A little more beef, Montgomery," shouted Sheppard, and himself grew as red as a turkey-cock with his efforts. Montgomery flung his heavy body upon the extremity of the bar, and with a crack something came up with a jerk. At the same time I heard below a faint rumbling and rushing as of water. I ran to the edge of the stream and peered over. At a point below me the water was sucking in with a gurgling sound.

"We've done it!" I shouted, and ere the words were out of my mouth Sheppard and the other were racing for the moat, whither they presently waved me with wild hands.

The water was pouring from the conduit in a strong stream fully one foot in thickness. That was enough. It would take some hours to fill the moat, but it might take all day, so long as we were secured by the fall of night. We left the sluices up, and went back.

"The next thing," said I, "is to attack the drawbridge. The portcullis wants oil, but that will do later."

"We'll have this castle a mediæval fortress in a twinkling," said Sheppard.

The heavy chains of the drawbridge were intact, but the machinery was in a very bad way; and without

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more ado we set to work upon it. I called my man Williams into requisition, and I think it took the four of us till six or seven o'clock in the evening ere we pronounced ourselves satisfied. After that we had a rehearsal with both portcullis and drawbridge. By this time the moat was swimming with water, which lapped under the shoulders of the bridge. There must have been fully twelve feet of water in the fosse.

"This won't do. We'll have an inundation," said Montgomery, and let the sluices down. When all was done, we surveyed our handiwork and were content. It was now close upon eight o'clock.

Dinner had been ready for more than half an hour, so we were informed by Mrs. Main, who must have regarded us as lunatics. The clock in the hall struck eight as we entered.

"Watch-time," said I; "who goes?"

We looked at each other, laughing. "It's my turn," said Sheppard, with a grimace; but I stopped him.

"No, let Montgomery," I said, meaningly.

"Right you are," responded Montgomery, cheerfully, and taking his brace of pistols, vanished along the corridor.

"How's this?" asked Sheppard. "I think the poor boy has earned his dinner."

"Bless you, he shall have his dinner," I answered; "only the danger is going to be later, and I'd rather Montgomery were asleep in bed than asleep on the tower."

"You do him injustice," said Sheppard.

"Well, to say the truth, he's got to redeem himself, and that's a fact."

We had arranged that Williams should stay the night in the castle, and imbuing him with the fear of burglars, had armed him with a shot-gun in case we

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should come to the worst. As Sheppard remarked, we could readily tangle the Welshman's brains if he became suspicious; and if his garrulity should bring us the sympathetic assistance of the law, I think we could be stupid enough and vague enough to confound his kindly efforts. Mrs. Main was by this time bound to us by iron ties through Sheppard's contrivance, nor do I know to this day exactly how he managed it, or in what directions he used his amiable and soothing fictions. The house-maid was Mrs. Main's hireling, and we need scarcely include her in our calculations. She might scream, or she might faint, but Mrs. Main answered for *her* silence, and in any case we had to take the risk.

We were now, as I conceived, adequately fortified against a surprise. From eight o'clock until dawn upon the next morning we should be stretched upon the rack of suspense, but each of us was sturdily resolved to accomplish his duty at all hazards. That an attack would be delivered, I had few doubts; but my anxiety lay rather as to the watch in which it would be delivered. I had sent Montgomery to his post early, as it seemed wiser for more responsible heads than his to take the deeper and darker hours of the night. From eight till eleven his time ran; and yet they might be upon us ere that. He was fed with some sandwiches and cheered with a little wine, while below Sheppard and I waited in a condition of tension.

"Oh, hang it!" exclaimed Sheppard presently, after dinner, "I can't stand this. Let us go and join him."

"You would be much wiser," said I, "to get an hour's sleep."

Sheppard shrugged his shoulders. "It's my turn next, you say, and I'm not used to be awakened in my

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beauty-sleep. It's bad for me. No; I'll go to bed when you relieve me. I'm not unaccustomed to such hours. Why, it will seem quite like London. But I recommend your own advice to yourself."

"And I will take it," I answered. "See that Montgomery gets his supper, and goes to bed like a sensible person. I'll be with you at two, punctually."

With which I left him, somewhat astonished at my decisive action.

I cannot say that I enjoyed a peaceful sleep. Although I was dog-tired, partly from the exertion of the day's work, and partly because I had had no rest the previous night, I still slumbered very fitfully and uneasily. A concourse of gratuitous dangers assembled in my dreams, and a great nightmare bestrode me. Finally I awoke in a fever, and throwing the hot blankets from me, stepped to the open window. My bedroom faced the north, and the cool airs that heralded the dawn wandered over me, reducing the fume and fire of my nerves. Far away some roistering bird was calling, not in his spring notes, but raucous now with the sombre heat of autumn. The curtain of the dawn was lifting. It was time for me to relieve Sheppard. My watch marked a quarter to two. Having dressed, I went down to the great hall, and, thrusting the western windows open, looked out. Trees, like great ghosts, invisible, whispered in the night together. The stars glimmered down below, and I recollected suddenly that I was peering into the water of the fosse. The stillness hung so deep that I was possessed of a sudden with a hundred fears. Was Sheppard murdered? And were the castle and its treasure now in the hands of those abominable assassins? I listened for a cry, but there was none, only the gentle wash of the waters against those ancient foundations, and the swishing of the leafage on the neighboring trees. The

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park lay, as one might have fancied, under the imminent hand of death; so grave and sepulchral were its precincts.

I stole up-stairs, clambering with a lantern to the keep. Upon the tower a silent figure turned and a low voice spoke

"Is that you, Ned?"

The sound almost startled me, occurring upon the stillness; so oddly did this human voice conflict with the wayward images of my mind. "It is a beautiful spectacle," he went on, meditatively. "I have never seen the night pass in this way. I have always *spent* it hitherto. It is passing now. One becomes conscious of the difference."

"Any news?" I asked.

"Well, I have two things to communicate. Do you see that tree?"

I peered into the darkness in the direction he had indicated, but was unable to make out anything definite.

"I hear it," I observed, doubtfully.

"Well, I've seen it," he retorted.

"Your eyes are better than mine, then," I answered.

"Maybe," said Sheppard, cheerfully, "maybe not. But I don't profess to see through a wall. That tree is fifty paces away, and it is an oak, very large and umbrageous."

"I believe you are right," I answered. "I think I recollect it."

"I didn't," he went on. "But I reckon to see by match-light as well as any."

I was puzzled. "Match-light?" I queried. "You haven't been—"

"Oh dear no!" he exclaimed. "My tower has been the central patch of blackness in this black night. Besides, who ever struck a match at night to see by?"

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No; the match was in that same tree I speak of." I was silent. "I presume it didn't strike itself," he continued.

"Lower your voice," I enjoined.

Sheppard smiled, as I could perceive even in the darkness.

"Oh, I don't see why," he declared. "There's no one there to strike a match now, to the best of my belief."

"How is that?"

"Did you hear no sound?" he asked.

I shook my head, and he patted his shot-gun.

"I congratulate you on your soundness of health. I fired about an hour ago, and I fancy the shot did not altogether miss. The match went out and my Brown Bess went off, simultaneous like, as my valet would say. There followed a still, small noise, and after that again pattering feet receding. I think some one has indigestion to-day in Sercombe's army."

"Bravo, Reginald!" said I. "All the better. They will see that we keep a sharp lookout. What else?"

Sheppard shouldered his gun and walked to the northern verge of the parapet. Stooping, he fumbled in the darkness, and the next moment his voice sounded from below my feet. "Follow me, Ned," he called. Groping about with feet and hands I came upon an open hole in the floor, and inserting my legs cautiously, happened upon the first step in a stone stairway. Diligently stepping down this through sheer blackness, I came out upon Sheppard's heels into what by comparison seemed daylight. The stars glistened in the canopy of heaven. I was out upon the battlements.

"We might have known there was some communication between the keep and the battlement," said Sheppard. "You see the advantage. I've been pacing this walk like a sentinel for the last two hours."

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"Can you get right round?"

"I'll show you," he returned, and led the way along that lofty roadway. The battlements naturally stretched across the width of the castle, running from wall to wall. The parapet stood some five feet high, and was broken with the machicolations of the design. There was ample space, therefore, for twenty men-at-arms to march abreast along the heights. Sheppard moved lightly, his head just swinging clear of the parapet and the black darkness contained between the shadows of the ramparts. The leaden roof was encumbered with rubbish—pieces of broken masonry, masses of dead and rotten leaves, huge lumps of wood, and decaying filth indescribable. Over this I stumbled as I kept at Sheppard's heels, and once or twice I pitched headlong into the dust and powder of generations of decay. A horrid stench filled my nostrils, and my throat was choked with particles of withered garbage. But presently Sheppard paused, and there rose quickly before me out of the superincumbent gloom the blacker mass of the drum-towers. Feeling his way, Sheppard hit upon an iron ladder connecting with the heights above, and presently we stood upon the topmost pinnacle of the castle and peered from it into the night. The nocturnal mists and blackness of the valley below were slowly shifting. The darkness seemed to me troubled, as though it boiled in the great cauldron of the night, and out of this stirring confusion, with slow and sombre deliberation, stepped the dawn. The trees gradually grew black, showing against a vast and gray gloom. Yet there was no light visible in those seething changes of the elements. The night still hung about us, reluctant, insistent, defending her last passes.

The southern drum-tower looked down upon deeper shadows, and I could not descry the wall below.

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I turned to my companion for an explanation, and smiled at the confusion of my own brain when he answered :

"That's the south, Ned. You know, the battlements are in ruins there."

Of course they were, but I was not to be deterred from a complete circuit of the walls by that small fact, and I groped for the ladder.

"Be careful, Ned," said Sheppard. "Better not. Wait till it's light."

Now I knew very well at the time that he spoke wisely, and that I was merely taking a rash hazard for no better purpose than to display to myself my own determination—or obstinacy, if you will. But the feeling was strong upon me, and so, picking my steps down the ladder, I paid him no attention. Presently my foot, descending, shot through empty air, and coincidentally with that the iron bar to which I was clinging with my left hand ceased abruptly. For a moment I had a sickly sensation in my stomach, and I went quite cold. But bracing myself together, I kneeled upon the lowermost step, and launched my body into space.

I have no intention, as I say, of defending my foolhardiness, nor do I take any credit for my ultimate escape from what was undoubtedly a deadly peril. My legs kicked aimlessly in the air and found no rest. There seemed nothing but vacancy beneath me; and as the conviction grew in my mind that I must abandon the essay, I tightened my hold upon the iron of the ladder and strove to pull myself up. But my wrists had already weakened in that tedious and unavailing oscillation in space, and, to my horror, I realized that I could not get back. My muscles stiffened and bulged in my arms. I felt the blood being dammed slowly in my head, and the noise of waters sounded in my ears.

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"Sheppard!" I called, faintly.

"Ned! Ned!" came Sheppard's whisper from above, and I was vaguely aware of a tiny spark of light shining as it were in heaven. The glow lit up the remnants of the iron ladder, and below this I could see, as I hung, the imminent brows of the ruined wall, and the gleaming light of water far away. Yet this illumination proved my salvation. The ruins were over-run with masses of Irish ivy, as I have said, and in the course of centuries this strongly growing creeper had clambered over and beyond the proper limits of decay, and clothed with great twisted branches the wall of the drum-tower to one side of me. Gasping from my exertions, I reached a hand towards these leaves, and catching at a thick stem, like a cable, clung to it desperately, while dividing my weight between the two supports. My only anxiety was as to whether the ivy would hold. Its attachment to the stones of the wall must be precarious, and yet I had to trust it; and poising an instant between the two, I dropped slowly upon the creeper. The friendly branches held, and I slipped carefully down, until I stood upon the broken stones of the ruined wall. Immediately I sat down and breathed deeply. High above I saw Sheppard light another match, and heard his voice calling to me; but I had no strength to reply. He flung the light from him, and, descending in an arc, it passed before my eyes and went out with a fizzle below. I leaned over, and the grayness of the coming dawn lay in the water thirty feet beneath me; a fragment of stone, detached by my movement, tumbled over the margin and fell with a great blob into the moat. There were twelve feet of water in the fosse. I shuddered and called back to Sheppard.

"Good God! I was afraid something had happened to you," said he. "Are you all right?"

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I explained the position. "Wait there, and I'll join you from the other side. You old fool, Ned!"

I accepted the criticism meekly, and retained my place upon the ivy-covered ruins, until I heard the sound of feet upon my right, and presently perceived Sheppard crawling over the stones towards me. He sat down near me, panting.

"You can get down from the other side pretty easily," he declared. "It's well to remember that."

"I don't quite see why you have done so," I answered, rather ungratefully; "you would be better asleep."

"Oh, nonsense!" he exclaimed; then, after a pause, "The dawn will be up directly, Ned."

Presently his head nodded upon his shoulder. I let him sleep. He must have been worn with his long vigil and the longer toil. But that was always Sheppard's way; his own excitements burned in him like oil, until they flickered out. He was strung upon delicate wires, and must pulsate to their least rhythm. I knew that he would not go to bed, and he had better take what rest was possible in this illegitimate way. The stars flared and went out; yet the dawn seemed long in coming. I pulled out my watch, and striking a match, consulted it. It was half-past three. Sheppard's head lurched forward, and his breath grew stertorous. A thin fine line of light cut across the eastern horizon. And then suddenly a stick cracked below me. I started, alert, intent, the drums roaring in my ears. A soft sibilation as of voices exchanged below the breath caught my eager senses. Surely I could discern the noise of footsteps falling quietly upon the grass. I strained my sight to pierce that gray-black cloud of gloom, but there was nothing visible; and, leaning softly forward, I touched Sheppard upon the shoulder. He was awake in an instant,

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and, ere I knew it, whispering at me, under his breath: "What is it? Are they come?"

"Listen!" I murmured. Silence dropped upon the environing night. A breeze of cool air crept out of the stagnant corners of the darkness; the trailing creepers upon the venerable ruins stirred in a faint wave of sound; the wind gathered in the vacancy, and a little roar broke over the walls about us. It was as if this long nocturnal stillness of the dead were called away and broken by some loud trumpet of the morning. Life returned and shuddered in that cold blast. Sheppard turned to me, motioning with his hand; reaching close, he put his lips to my ears.

"They're down by the moat—exploring," he said; "several, I think. Shall I fire?"

I grasped his hand in return. "No, no," I murmured back; "you stay here, and keep quiet, with your shot-gun. I'm going down to find out. They can have no suspicion we have discovered them. Keep cool."

With which I slipped noiselessly on hands and knees, until I reached the back parts of the wall. From here it was a descent of twenty feet or more into the court-yard, but the face of the ruin was irregular, and I found, by groping, projecting stones which offered me a foothold; so that presently I dropped to the flags of the yard without sound and stole into the house. My first duty was to awaken Montgomery and the man Williams. Both of them I despatched by means of a ladder to join Sheppard on the heights, and, that done, I took a lantern, and descended into the corridor of dungeons. My light was but feeble, and my progress was necessarily slow along that path of inky blackness. At each of the turnings I paused, and proceeding to the bottom, peered out through the grating on the waters of the fosse. I had in this

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manner, and exercising this precaution, made the circuit of half the castle, and was now upon the southern face, and, as I concluded, in the proximity of Shepard and the others. Here it was that I met my first alarm. As I gazed out of the grating on my tour of inspection, and was almost now convinced that our fears had been unnecessary, and that we had been deceived by the early movements of the dawn, suddenly there grew before my eyes, and out of the grayness, a vast head, set with horrible, rolling eyes and with a profusion of shaggy hair. The apparition loomed before the bars of the window, and with a quick movement seemed to push forward as though to enter. Involuntarily I started back into the darkness. The face glared at me, pressing upon the bars, the lip twisted over the red gums and yellow fangs, and the water dripping from its black hair. Its eyes measured me with a glance, and for half a minute of time we stood confronting each other, my tiny thread of light streaking the ghastly apparition with yellow. The next moment it had vanished, and, my wits returning in a tide, I flung myself forward to the grating and looked out. The lantern shone upon the dark waters, and that was all. But this was more than enough for me, and I was aware that it was likely to be quite enough for our assailants.

Hurriedly I quitted the corridor and regained the upper air. By means of the ladder I reached the rest of the party, and at once communicated my information.

CHAPTER XI

WE HOLD THE CASTLE

THE dawn was now abreast of the hill-tops, and the trees of the park stood out like shadows in a great mist.

"They will begin here," observed Sheppard, "when they find there is no entrance below."

"I don't envy them the twelve feet of water to start with," said I.

"I don't envy them if they get here," remarked Montgomery, quietly.

Williams said nothing. He looked from one to another curiously, and then craned his neck over the castle wall, and scrutinized the foreground. Now and then he grasped his shot-gun almost mechanically, as if to feel certain that it was there. I agreed with Sheppard that if any attack was to be delivered it would be upon the breach made by time in the defences. There was no way into the castle by the gratings above the moat, and it would take artillery at least to shake the huge portcullis. Yet it seemed incredible that any sane man should attempt to swim the fosse and scale the battlements. If I had been seen by that appalling face, as I conceived, the enemy would be aware that we were on the watch and ready for them. If so, I considered it more than likely that they would retire, and make the best of the reconnaissance they had achieved. Suddenly Sheppard got on his knees.

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"I don't like this," he said. "What the mischief are they up to? Let me go and see."

I considered. To say the truth, I did not like it myself; but would it be wise to divide our forces?

After a momentary reflection I decided to do so, and enjoining upon Montgomery a strict vigilance, I crawled after Sheppard towards the upper battlements.

Once we had reached the ramparts we proceeded more quickly, but still with great caution, stopping at intervals to reconnoitre the ground below. But there was nothing to be seen or heard, and until we had passed the keep and had got upon the western wall we encountered no sign of the enemy. Here, however, Sheppard stopped short, and pressed his hand on my shoulder.

"Down!" he said.

Simultaneously with his words a whiz of cold air passed my nose, and a small crack of some fire-arm ensued upon it.

"That's by way of introduction," said Sheppard, "and now the fight begins."

Keeping our heads below the parapet, we stumbled as fast as possible along the roof, and, presently after, rounded the corner to the northern wall. Here a sight met our eyes, even in that obscurity, which struck amazement and even terror to my heart. I have already spoken of the sycamore which stood outside my bedroom window and beyond the moat. It was a lofty tree, spreading very amply, and mounted to within a dozen feet of the parapet. This the ingenious wits of some one—and I had no hesitation in naming the author of the plan—had utilized to scale the walls. As I found afterwards, a tough and serviceable rope had been employed to connect the peaks of the battlement with the tree, and over this, as we

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came into sight, the black figures of men were scrambling. I had little doubt, on thinking over it subsequently, that my presence in the basement, revealed to the man in the moat, had given the signal for the adventure, seeing that I was not likely to be in my chamber and able to detect them ere the enterprise had gone forward sufficiently.

Both of us sprang forward on the instant, but ere we could reach the spot the foremost of the men, landing, stood up and made at us with a cutlass. Taken aback by the shock, Sheppard, who was in front, gave way, and the weapon, swinging heavily, cut the air with a formidable whistle, and struck the leads near my foot. I leaped at the fellow's throat, drawing my revolver, and, borne back by the impetus of my charge, he stumbled against the second man. But by this time some half-dozen of the storming party had gained the ramparts, and, without a pause, bore down upon us. No shots were fired, and the struggle that ensued was decided in a silence almost complete, save for the noise of our hurrying feet, the sound of blows, and the hard breathing of the combatants. I cannot but admit that if the dawn had been a little further advanced, and it had been possible to distinguish between the various bodies raging in the medley, things would have gone very badly with us. But as it was, the darkness fought for us once more, as it had fought the previous evening. I brought the butt of my revolver full upon the head of one man, and he fell like a log. Sheppard's arms were twisted round another, and the two swaying together stood out for an instant against the sky, and were then snapped up into the confusion of the mellay. Blows rained upon us, and the warm gush of blood started from my arm. With a rush we were carried backward, and the struggle seemed all over. At that instant I bethought me of



"I LEAPED AT THE FELLOW'S THROAT"

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Montgomery and Williams, and getting my finger on the trigger of my weapon, I fired. The shot flew aimlessly, but the noise rang loud upon the heights, and passed from the court-yard in dwindling echoes. Then, throwing off the man who was struggling with me, I seized Sheppard's arm, and dragging him from the kneeling posture into which he had been thrust, I ran across the leads towards the round tower of the keep. Sheppard raced with me, panting as he went, and after us pressed a thin stream of black creatures just visible against the heavens. Scrambling up the stairway, we jammed down the lid which gave access to the top of the tower, and, turning, looked down upon the nether battlements. After an ineffectual rally upon the stairs, the assailants drew off, and, huddling in a group some twenty paces away, whispered together. I heard the sounds of their voices stirring in argument, and now and then a syllable came to me, faintly familiar. Where had I heard it? Above the rest, and lighted by the kindling sky, towered a form which I took to be Sercombe's. For the space of three minutes or more this interval of rest continued, and then a louder voice cried something from the terrace. I recognized it now. The language was Greek; and those strange and horrible creatures, that seemed somehow to my excited brain compact of all deformities, were Greeks—sailors also, as I conjectured from the smartness of the trick which had led to our discomfiture. At this moment a low whistle came from the farther corner of the tower, and immediately two heads stole over the coping.

"It is I," said Montgomery. "What has happened?"

We welcomed them with warmth, and hastily unfolded the situation. But the words were scarce out of my mouth when a noise of feet and a clanging of

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iron proclaimed a renewed attack upon the tower. Upon those heights, as I have explained, lay the wreckage and débris of centuries. Groping in this, Montgomery found a large stone, and, leaning over the parapet, hurled it down upon the crowd. Almost as quick as thought we followed his example, and had the satisfaction of seeing the parties withdraw to a safer distance. It was now plain to me that Sercombe had issued an order against the use of fire-arms. If the business could be managed without undue disturbance, he had decided that it was wiser. Indeed, the strange part of this remarkable encounter was that, saving the first shot and my own signal of distress, the conflict had been carried on in comparative silence. I had also come to the conclusion that the fight was one to obtain possession of ourselves. It was to secure our bodies that the attack was directed. Sercombe knew well enough, and Hood knew even better, that to gain access to the precincts of the castle meant very little, provided we were still at liberty and able to resist a forcible removal of the treasure. Bound and gagged, or stunned or dead, we should offer them no further trouble, and the Treasure of the Vyvians would be theirs to deport at their convenience.

Sheppard clicked the trigger of his revolver. "The first man that essays this position shall find the time has come for real warfare," he observed, quietly.

"Do not be in a hurry," I answered; "we have still the upper hand." He waited expectant. "You know the drum-tower down which I climbed? I think it would not be a bad plan to venture that and take them in the rear."

"The devils are plotting mischief," said Sheppard, uneasily.

"I wonder if we could manage that ascent?" I said.

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Montgomery moved forward. "I will," he said, briefly.

"No, no," said Sheppard.

"I think I had better go," I hazarded.

"You're wanted here," said Montgomery. "I know the way"; and ere I could speak or interfere he sprang away and was on the ladder leading to the southern battlements.

"Come back! come back!" I called under my breath.

"Ned! Ned! don't spoil his chances," whispered Sheppard, and we watched his big body vanishing in silence.

"That boy is going to his death," he murmured.

"I hope you'll trust him now."

"Oh, hang your sentiment!" I answered, uneasily.

"I think we'd better go back," he said, after a pause, and we returned to Williams. The man stood like a rock, his eyes riveted eagerly upon the dark figures of our antagonists. "Shall I fire?" said he, in his high Welsh voice.

"No," said I. "Hold yourself together, and fire if I tell you. We shall have blood on our hands soon enough."

There followed another space of silence, broken only by the interjected voices below murmuring in conference. For my own part, I was taken up with Montgomery and his hazardous venture. I blamed myself for not stopping him at any cost, and in my mind's eye I followed him in his perilous ascent. It was still too dark to watch his progress, for the drum-tower was as yet shrouded in vagueness, and no sound greeted us from the stillness of the breaking dawn. I think some five minutes passed in this dreadful stage of anxiety, and then I observed a movement among the men below. Evidently they had concerted some plan, and we were to resist a fresh attack. Just at

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this point, and when our thoughts had been necessarily called off Montgomery, and were directed to the new development, there arose a loud whooping on the battlements, and a tall black body ran in the rear of the stormers and fell upon them. I saw in the gray light something, as a flail, rise and fall, and I heard the astonished cries of the enemy.

"Down! Down! Follow me," I said, sharply, and, scrambling by the stairway, flew out upon the battlements, with Sheppard and Williams at my heels. I had only my revolver for the attack, but I used the heavy butt freely, and cries and curses arose from the pack of Greeks, who imagined, I have no doubt, that they were taken in force upon both sides. They scattered like a flight of sparrows, and Montgomery almost fell into my arms in the ardor of his onset. Then we pursued, and as they ran I fired some barrels of my revolver in the air. The alarm increased their panic, and, turning the corner, they flung themselves in confusion on the ropes that connected with the sycamore. I heard Sercombe's voice cursing, but where in the mellay he was I had no notion. For at that moment there arose before us (I cannot say whence) a tall figure, very lithe and active, that grappled with me, gurgling strange oaths. Two strong arms were braced about my back, and it was with the utmost difficulty that I kept my feet. Together we swayed and rocked, drawing nearer to the edge of the parapet. I was conscious of nothing but that ferocious struggle, and, locked in that terrible embrace, I already tasted death. With all the strength at my command I flung my body forward, and, twisting my legs about my opponent's, I bore him sideways towards the roof. As I did so he wriggled a hand free, and snatched it to him, fumbling in his coat. I bent him backwards, and suddenly his hand stood out be-

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fore my eyes, with all the light of the gray dawn gleaming upon steel. Death certainly affronted me in that second, but I hardly knew it. For quickly an arm was thrust over mine, where it gripped the ruffian round the loins, and the next instant his hand fell and his head went back, and, slipping through my grasp, the body rolled over the parapet and dropped, with a splashing plunge, into the waters of the moat.

It was some seconds ere I could look round, and when I did Sheppard was standing by my side, a long Persian dagger in his hand, gazing vacantly over the stone coping; and the ramparts were clear of the enemy.

"You saved my life, old man," I gasped.

"I believe I did," he returned, slowly, but seemed to be pondering something, so remote and abstracted was his air. He stepped forward and severed with his knife the ropes which bound the sycamore.

"You must chop that down," he said.

Montgomery looked at him admiringly. "My God!" he said.

Suddenly a great glow lit up the eastern heavens, and the trees and the time-worn ramparts rose green and gray in the morning. The dawn broke over us. No living soul was visible in that early light, and only the water rocked faintly against the masonry of the castle, carrying on its surface that inert body.

Sheppard's hand opened in a spasm, and the knife fell, cutting an arc of light. He looked up at me and smiled wearily. "I think I'll go to bed, old chap."

"You have had no rest for forty-eight hours," said I. "Don't be a fool; sleep before you think."

"Yes, I believe I'll take your advice," he replied, mechanically, and, turning slowly, marched with dull and sober steps towards the drum-tower. I watched him go, and then I turned to the others.

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"Any damage?" I asked.

Montgomery showed his teeth. "Pooh!" he said, "they didn't show fight!"

Williams shook his head. "I have a bad knuckle," he said.

I positively yelled with laughter; somehow the hilarity would not be denied. "I owe you both thanks," I said, presently. "Montgomery, you're a brick, and I don't forget it." He hung his head in a sheepish fashion, but I doubt not was very well pleased. "Now get you gone," I resumed; "there will be nothing further to-night, and if there is I will let you know."

For my own part sleep was impracticable, worn and jaded though I was. The events of the night, and of that sharp struggle, clamored on my brain, arresting every sense to attention. I leaned over the parapet and watched the dawn come up for the second time; but to-day it rose in different circumstances, flushed and lurid, menacing storm. The sky was red as with blood, and a black cloud fringed the margin of the horizon. My thoughts flew about like a whirling wheel, leaving upon me dim impressions. The light grew apace, and struck the castle walls with fire. I was aware of something in the moat below, but my mind made no inquiries. It rested, palpitant, and turning upon itself in idle revolutions. The sounds of the dawn crept out across the quietude, and the trees waved and shook in a gust of air. Disturbed by this flux of the wind, or over-balanced by its own weight, a jagged stone toppled on the parapet and fell. It struck the water with a crash, and my eyes followed it. Then it was that for the first time I knew what had been beating at the door of my brain.

Suddenly, and at the instant sight of it, the confusion of my wits precipitated, and they settled clear and sharp. The cloud passed from me, and I stared

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with open eyes and a dreadful appreciation at the body.

The water was tossed into undulations started by the fallen stone, and the body, supported across a fallen branch, rose and fell with the water. It lay face downward, heaped in a jumble of limbs, passive, yet formidable. Somehow I had not imagined it thus, floating and visible, an accusing memorial of that tragic struggle. If I had conceived it at all, it was as some horrid secret buried out of sight, sunk in two fathoms of water, and rolling silently among the grasses of the moat. But there it lay, and stared at me from every feature of the dead flesh. It and I kept company, the dead and the living, in that quiet hour. I could not support the comparison of the contrast, and, drawing back, I moved to another part of the battlement. But the thought pursued me in my flight. Had Shepard struck too soon? Was it, indeed, inevitable? For the first time there grew into solid fact the horror of the supposition I had several times entertained. We were embarked upon a war, committed of our own act and will to a deadly strife, of which no one of us could see the end. And beneath me, stored in the vaults of the venerable fortalice, lay the accursed treasure for which this blood must be spilled. I let my eyes go westward towards the Pitch, as the people in those parts termed the hill behind the castle. They rested on a glorious purple light which faded slowly into gold. Then they fell back into the moat, and there lay the body below me, tumbling and jerking like a thing of wrath in the rolling water. The wind caught the branch and twisted it about; the horrible burden spun like a slow teetotum; its head lifted, and for a moment the eyes, wide and ferocious, glared up at me. Hastily I withdrew, and mounted to the top of the keep. Before me rose the great tree, into which

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Sheppard had fired his pistol. Beyond stretched the shrubberies of the park which led by the course of the stream. As far as my vision would carry I could see no signs of the presence of man. Almost unconsciously my reluctant gaze was still attracted in the direction in which the corpse lay. The horrible thing seemed to draw near. It rose out of its bed, dripping, and appeared to hurry towards me. The wind turned it about, and it set for me in the eddies of the stream. I fled with a shudder, and obsessed by multifarious forebodings. Like an avenger, this pitiful and repulsive carcass stalked me in my wanderings. I could bear the fellowship no longer, and yet there arose now upon my mind, premeditating flight, a new perplexity. I dared not leave the body there, exposed to the sight of the world. Already its dumb tongue cried damnable things upon us; and the publication of that bloody deed was impossible. Doubting in my thoughts, and torn by shapeless fears, I stood irresolute; but at that moment my attention was caught by a movement in the bushes across the park. A head peeped out, and scrutinized the scene with diligence. Then Sercombe's face emerged, red and bloated. He pushed through the covert and strode boldly towards the castle, followed presently by his companion, a rough, black fellow with a gallows look. I watched them approach and halt under the walls, facing the dead body underneath me. I suppose my outline appeared against the sky, for Sercombe looked up and fixed his eyes on me. But he said nothing, only addressed the Greek in an undertone. I leaned forward and regarded them intently. The rough fellow stepped to the brink of the moat, and, stooping forward, pulled the floating bough towards him. It moved, carrying its hideous passenger.

When next I looked, the Greek had the body on his shoulders, and the two were retreating into the un-

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derwood. At the end of the reach of turf Sercombe came to a stand, and once more looked up at me. But he still made no sign, and I could imagine that the color of his face had faded. It seemed somehow to me to be ominous of the new position in which we were involved. I descended into the castle. Outside Sheppard's door I paused. It stood open, and I looked in. The light streamed through the window and fell across his face. He lay dressed upon the bed, a red stain of blood upon his cheeks; and as I gazed, his hands moved convulsively—a contortion twisted his sleeping face. I left him, and returning to my own room, threw myself upon the bed.

CHAPTER XII

WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH THE LAW

It was not long before we were visited by the first retribution for what might be accounted a crime, and what was at least provoked by our own illegal acts. Indeed, the surprise fell sooner than I had anticipated, although it happened by the means I had always considered probable. That Williams, garrulous and sharp-eyed Welshman as he was, could be secured in silence was wellnigh impossible; for even if concealment had been for his personal benefit, he would still have plied his tongue; and, though he were sworn to secrecy, the private transactions of this singular feud would have slowly dribbled through his communications, and become current in the gossip of the country. This knowledge was mainly instrumental in deterring us from confiding in him. Burglars were the bugaboo we had brandished before him; and burglary, sure enough, was the word that ran over the district. The news came to us late that morning. As I gathered, Williams, who was keeping company with some girl of Llanellan, woke early from his belated sleep and ran down to the village, full of the battle. His own appearance in it, as I afterwards discovered, had been gorgeously conceived and magniloquently rendered. I believe, according to his version, it was he, and he alone, who gave the signal for the final rout; and certainly he was the author of that fall from the battlements. But this was just

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as well, for the man knew nothing of its fatal issue, and poor Sheppard did not grudge him the credit.

But I am trespassing upon my narrative too rashly. Williams returned later in the morning, and, apparently to celebrate his own cleverness, made his communications to me. He had given warning to the school-master at Llanellan, who had offered to hand on the notice to the authorities at Raymond. I could have cursed the man for his folly and his babbling tongue, but I was just enough to recall that his conduct was merely natural. In truth, if he thought at all, he must have considered us a pack of egregious asses for not taking better precautions, and acquiring the aid of the Raymond police. I could do nothing, therefore, but acquiesce with as good a grace as I might, and wish heartily that we had left him sleeping as soundly as Mrs. Main and the maid, who, it appeared, had never opened an eye throughout the night, although the former asserted that she had dreamed "there was a thunder-storm like," adding the enclitic familiar to her conversation.

But the situation remained to be faced, and I guessed that we should be confronted with it very shortly. Consequently we must compose a plan of action, and whatever we agreed upon must run no risk of denial at other hands. In this connection it seemed that I must pay a necessary visit to Sercombe, a task which for some reason was not to my taste. Sheppard, who had quite recovered himself, and had not yet referred in any way to the event of the early morning, cordially approved my suggestion.

"It will be a wise course," he declared. "And, besides, I am anxious to inspect these foreigners nearer."

Where the Greeks were lodged we knew not, but it was evidently not at The Woodman, for on our

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arrival there the place was deserted, except by the woman who had charge of Hood's kitchen. She could give us little information. She had not seen her master since she went to bed on the previous evening. But Captain Sercombe had been called at nine o'clock, and had gone out after eating a hasty breakfast. There was no one else staying in the house. Such was the information she imparted to us, influenced to her frankness, I had no doubt, by my position as the big landed proprietor of the place. Which way had Captain Sercombe gone? He had gone down the roadway in the direction of Raymond.

With this we had to content ourselves, but, determined at all hazards to catch Sercombe, Sheppard and I took the narrow lane that led down the valley, in the hope of hitting upon him. At the bottom of the valley the stream makes an open pool of some considerable size upon a piece of flat land. Here it receives a few exiguous branches from the lower hills, and rests, as it were, in those spreading shallows ere it narrows and spins for the Ray. The wood was sparse about the pool, but it was very private and retired from the roads, and it was quite by accident that we penetrated the wood so far. But here we perceived through the leafage the smoke of fires and heard the noises of human creatures, an uncommon feature in the silent Gwent. Pushing through the brushwood, we came next upon a veritable encampment in that friendly spot. And now we solved the riddle which had perplexed us earlier in the morning, for the first man my eyes fell upon was my old acquaintance of the squint. Here was not a camp of gypsies, but of cut-throat Greeks!

The discovery was no sooner made than it was confirmed by a voice sounding from my right, and calling my name in familiar tones.

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"Ah, how d'ye do, Mr. Greatorex? Glad to see you. What pleasant chance has brought you into our little village?"

The man stood before me as debonair and well-groomed as ever, his puffy red face smiling cheerfully into mine, and his bloodshot eyes twinkling with gayety. It seemed almost inconceivable that this fellow was but a few hours earlier upon the footing of a deadly foe, and earnest to rob us even of our lives. And yet I confess that even at this juncture, and after the grave events of the siege, I experienced for him, what always underlay my superficial feelings, a genuine liking. The impudence of the adventurer, his very gayety, the assumption he wore that, whatever he did and however ruthlessly he pursued us, he was still a welcome acquaintance—all these facts gave a charm to his person. His benignity was superb; it was that of an urbane philanthropist. He was ready to crack a joke with you, to recount his entertaining adventures in your ears, or to offer you his choicest cigar. He was a man pre-eminently cast for social popularity; and circumstances, or his own wickedness, had made him a scoundrel, and a very bad scoundrel at that.

And so it was that I responded quite affably to his greeting, oblivious of the past, and almost forgetting the future. He stood by me, surveying the encampment, his bulky form overtopping mine by three inches at the least.

"It's a pity, Mr. Greatorex," says he, reflecting, "that these animals have no spunk. Spunk goes a long way with me, I will admit; and that warms my heart to you. I doff my hat to Mr. Sheppard, and, by-the-way, to my young friend Montgomery also."

"What you lack in quality, I suppose, you calculate to make up in quantity," I said, grimly.

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"Precisely, Mr. Greatorax; you've hit it. That's the rub. If I had three of my mongrel Indians here I'd reckon to finish the job in a couple of days; but one has to use the material to hand."

"No doubt," said Sheppard; "but your plans must have been laid a long time."

The captain cast a curious glance at him. "Well, you seem to know," he said, slowly. "But I tell you, frankly, that greed can carry too far, and that a jaw too widely open will sometimes lose a bite. It takes too long to shut it. If I had managed this business—" But here, apparently recollecting himself, he broke off, and turned away with a little frown. But presently he resumed, wearing his accustomed good-humored expression. "There was never any good came of a Greek. I've known them upwards of twenty years, and I never knew one that was fit for anything save to jab you in the back when you were not looking."

"I should say," remarked Sheppard, mildly, "that you had a very suitable gang for your purpose."

Sercombe laughed and winked at Sheppard. "Oh, I don't fancy the knife myself, though some people do."

Sheppard turned deathly pale, but he smiled politely, and answered, "There is no knowing what scruples a man will develop."

I could have clapped him on the shoulder for his mastery of himself, and in my heart I cried "Bravo!"

But this turn of the conversation suddenly woke me to a sense of my errand, and I quickly communicated my news to Sercombe. A smile widened his mouth.

"I thought we should come to this," he said, cheerfully, "and I would have laid odds I should have had you here on this mission. I knew you would drop

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that mealy mouthed righteousness of yours. What I disliked in you, Mr. Greatorex, from the outset, if I may say so without offence, was your damned British pharisaism. You couldn't look at a job squarely. It's not your fault, but that of your training. I had the same defect once myself, but a campaign in the Ionian Isles knocked the pretences out of me. That's how I came to know these scoundrels so well. Well, I'm glad we meet evenly at last. You can see for yourself there's not a penn'orth to choose between us, save that you've had first blood," and with that he looked at Sheppard.

This time Sheppard held his color under control, but he looked away, and I perceived, in spite of his severe restraint, a twitching of his nostrils.

"Come, come," said I, "we must take what steps we may in self-defence against cut-throats, captain."

"I'm with you there," said Sercombe, cheerily. "And the steps I usually take consist of a barker. I shoot out of my coat-tails as often as not. My plan is to fire when I see a squint."

"I fear you rebuke me," I replied, with a bow. "But I swear that I would have fired if it had been any other place but London. I am so well known there."

Sercombe burst out laughing. "I once thought," he said, "that Mr. Sheppard was more my sort; but, by God! I believe I pin my note on you."

"You honor me," I returned. "But come, to business."

The captain plucked his long red mustache meditatively. "I'm sorry I can't discuss this with you now, gentlemen," he said. "After all, it's your affair, though I admit I have a certain interest in it. But if I may come up and see you about three o'clock, we can go into details. I fancy it's a concerted plan we want."

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"That's so," I returned, feeling terribly mean and small to be conspiring so against the laws of my country with an admitted scoundrel.

"Very well, let us say three," said the captain, and struck out his hand as though to dismiss us.

For myself, being in the frame of mind I have described, I contrived to overlook his arm; but Sheppard, all smiles, sprang forward and shook him heartily. "By-the-way," he said, brightly, "and where is my friend Hood?"

"Hood!" echoed Sercombe, and looked at us queerly. "Oh, *Mr.* Hood is inventing a new manœuvre. He is a better soldier than I am, is *Mr.* Hood, naturally." I suppose he saw that we exchanged glances. "My dear sirs," he said, "I only tell you what you might suppose for yourselves. *Mr.* Hood is trying his hand at generalship, but I don't reveal his plan of campaign. Perhaps you guess it," and he burst out laughing rather unpleasantly.

It was obvious to both of us that there was a bitterness in Sercombe's words. Fallen though he was from a respectable estate, and sunk as he had become in a career of dissipation and unscrupulous adventure, he still retained a certain feeling of his own dignity. How far the difference between Hood and himself had gone I could not know, but if it went much further it seemed as though we might take some advantage out of it. But of the two, it was Hood—Hood with his lean, black face—that I feared.

Sercombe kept his appointment with commendable punctuality, entering our council-chamber, if I may so describe the smaller of the halls in which we usually sat, with the jauntiness of his morning's encounter. Lunch was but newly over, and I felt myself descend in Montgomery's eyes when I offered the captain a glass of wine. He took it airily, even with a kind of

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rude grace, which sometimes characterized him, and nodded us a good-health, plunging at once into the matter of his visit.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen ; I can spare little time to-day. You will understand that I am very busy." (This with a twinkling eye.) "But we must needs oblige a friend, and I am here, over a dusty road, to meet you."

"We are gravely indebted to you," said I, ceremoniously. "But I must point out that this point touches you as much as, if not more than, it affects us."

"We have shed no blood," said the captain, emphatically, and settling back for argument.

"'Tis not your fault then," I retorted, "and, in any case, what blood was shed was spilled in self-defence, in repelling an illegal assault upon our persons and our property."

"You would find it difficult to prove that in a court of law," says he, casting his eye at me.

"I thought we were agreed to leave the law alone," said I.

"Unhappily," observed Sercombe, with a laugh, "the law won't leave us alone."

"Oh, come," said I, impatiently, "we are confined to this, Captain Sercombe. Are you prepared to help us? You yourself say time presses. If not, it may well be that we shall throw the onus upon the proper offenders, and leave you to shift for yourselves."

"And what about the treasure, my friend?" asked the captain, with an ogle.

"I know nothing of any treasure," I remarked, calmly, "nor does either of my friends here. Presumably an attack was made upon the castle for the purpose of burglary, and I can conceive that my silver only was aimed at. I think that will suffice to explain the cowardly attack of some ruffianly foreign-

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ers. I think the Raymond police will easily understand that."

Sercombe looked somewhat blank, but in a moment resumed his cheerfulness. "Quite so; and as such a course would benefit no one, we are to combine forces against a common enemy. Well, fire ahead."

At this moment an interruption came through the entrance of the maid with the announcement of some visitors at the door. We all stared at one another.

"Who are they?" I demanded.

But the girl, being raw and unsophisticated, had not inquired their names. They were, however, gentlemen, and there was a policeman with them. This was enough for us, and an uncomfortable silence fell on us. Sercombe raised his eyebrows and sucked in his lips soberly.

"Have 'em in," says Sheppard. I looked dubious; we had arranged nothing, and had no plan of action between us. "It is far wiser," urged Sheppard. "Don't give it too elaborate an appearance." And, turning, he gave the order to the maid.

I was still doubting, and Sercombe was regarding Sheppard with a certain grave interest, when the maid returned, ushering in an important-looking old gentleman with a very ceremonious manner, and a man whom I took to be a sergeant in plain clothes.

"Mr. Greatorrex?" asked the old gentleman, with heavy courtesy.

I bowed. "That's my name," I replied. "I suppose you have come upon this business of last night?"

"Yes, sir," said he, signalling to the sergeant, who forthwith pulled out a note-book. "It looks a bad thing for the county. We haven't had so barefaced a crime in the neighborhood within the recollection of this generation. Indeed, the case seems remarkable; so remarkable that, happening to be at the

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station when your messenger arrived, I have considered it my duty to take up the affair in person. My name, sir, is Colonel Landell, and I am a justice of the peace."

I was evidently called upon to make some suitable rejoinder to his piece of oratory, and I bowed again, and emphasized my satisfaction in receiving so distinguished and so famous a justice, who would soon dissipate the mists of suspicion and mystery with which this singular affair was involved.

This address set the old gentleman upon his legs, metaphorically speaking, and forthwith he plunged into the depths.

"This party, I understand, Mr. Greatorrex," said he, "attacked you early this morning?"

"About three o'clock," I answered. He commended the reply to the sergeant, who scribbled in his book.

"Had you any reason to fear this assault was intended?"

I hesitated. "Well, to say the truth," I replied, "we were not wholly without some suspicions."

"I may take it upon myself to say, sir," suddenly broke in the captain, "that it was I that first put the suspicion into Mr. Greatorrex's head?"

He looked at me as if inviting my corroboration, and a twinkle glistened in the rascal's eye.

"That is true," said I, gravely. "Captain Sercombe is entirely responsible for my suspicions."

The ambiguity of the phrase tickled us both, and a smile was very privately exchanged between us.

"May I ask, Captain Sercombe," said the old gentleman, politely, recognizing this importation with a bow, "what reasons you had for supposing Ivor Castle would be attacked in this extraordinary way, and whether you have any clew to the offenders?"

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The captain lolled back in his chair and stroked his red mustache. "I used my eyes, colonel. I have lived a sharp life, sir. And when I see a fact I record it. That's a hint which is of use in our profession, as I make no doubt you know well enough," he said, courteously. "This affair of the attack is a bad business; there's no denying that. But it might have been worse. No lives were lost, you see," and he glanced out of his ensanguined eyes at Sheppard.

"No, we must be thankful for that," observed the justice, heartily. "But do I understand you that you had indeed actual evidence that the burglary was planned?"

"I can add two to two, colonel, and make them four," says Sercombe, seeming to be very complacent. "And staying of accident in the same neighborhood with my friend Greatorex, I put a point on his wits. That was all. I make no claim to extra smartness; but when I see a number of lazy-looking gypsies about, there's no good promised, according to my notions."

"You are right, you are right," agreed the justice. But here the sergeant struck in for the first time, casting a glance from sharp, beady eyes on the captain.

"Where were these gypsies, sir?"

We all looked at Sercombe, who showed not the least discomfiture, but bit the tip off a cigar.

"I trust I have your permission, Greatorex?" said he. "The gypsies, sir, are encamped at the bottom of the valley; have been so, indeed, for a week."

I was astonished at the man's audacity. He had actually revealed the secret of his nest of cutthroats. The sergeant turned the pages of his note-book.

"The man Williams, examined this morning, states that one of the men, seen closely, looked like a for-



"'I CAN RECOLLECT WHAT I SAID VERY WELL.'"

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"You can judge for yourself, if we went to the trouble," I returned, sharply.

Imperturbably he repeated his question again, "What were the terms of the warning?"

The man took me aback, and, moreover, I was a little angry at this impertinent inquisition: but before I could arrest my thoughts for a reply Sercombe intervened.

"I can recollect what I said very well," he said, taking the cigar from his mouth, "if it interests you, sergeant. I said, 'Greatorex, there's a number of very indifferent-looking scoundrels down the valley. You have some valuable plate, and this is a lonely spot. Moreover, I saw a couple of them hanging furtively about the plantations as I came up. Now I've never seen a moat full nor a drawbridge work, and if I were you and you were me, I fancy this ditch would be filled and the bridge hung up for my satisfaction and your edification, and for the confusion of any nefarious scoundrel with a big maw.' These were the exact words, as I happen to remember, in which I introduced the subject, as Mr. Greatorex will no doubt recall, though he is not likely to have the terms on his tongue like myself. But that, I reckon, is what started it." And with this Sercombe replaced his cigar between his teeth, and went on smoking tranquilly.

The sergeant thanked him, frowning in some embarrassment; then he turned on his heel, and, saluting to the company, vanished after his superior through the doorway.

Sercombe got up. "Well, we can break up now, gentlemen," he said. "Sorry to interrupt harmony, but I've got business to do."

"I am greatly obliged to you," I said, somewhat sheepily.

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"You're very welcome," says the captain, with a wide smile.

"But what about the gypsies?" I continued.

"Oh, I suppose the police will catch them," he remarked, his grin growing broader. "But, you see, none of you would be able to recognize them."

Sheppard burst into laughter, and I was fain to follow him; but Montgomery stared in amazement, and with a certain latent dislike at the adventurer, pursuing him out into the court-yard with his steadfast eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

WE TAKE A PRISONER

SERCOMBE's frankness proved of a piece with his conduct hitherto. I could not imagine the old soldier making a bad blunder, and the news that came to us later demonstrated the method in his candor. Shepard encountered the sergeant near Llanellan, and found that his expedition into the Gwent had had no luck. There was no camp in the bottom. Evidences of the recent presence of strangers there were in plenty, but not a sign remained to indicate into what hiding-place they had withdrawn. To move a number of persons with their effects, and the men foreigners too, and thereby certain to attract the attention of the villagers, would seem impracticable without some public notice. But apparently no one had seen a trace of the fugitives; they had vanished as completely as though the encampment had been a mirage of our disordered brains.

It was clear, however, that there would be no assault upon the castle that night. Jones and his troopers hung about the village, and the former was too zealous to allow any disorder under his nose. Sercombe would not dare to risk a second attack. That much was for our comfort. He had put it to me ingenuously that the interference of the police would embarrass him, and I was heartily glad to hear it. For we needed some further resources for our defence; that was plain enough. We had been able to

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resist the enemy on his first two attempts, but we had a most cunning and deadly foe, and I began to doubt if we could hold out against a renewal of hostilities, unless, indeed, we broke our silent compact, and called in the assistance of the law. We had decided to discard Williams from our society. He was too hazardous an ally, and we could not hope to circumvent the police a second time. As it was, I saw that some suspicions were breeding in the sergeant's mind. I suppose we took too lightly what was bruited about the country for a great "sensation." The storming of the castle, even in the distorted narrative which Williams had delivered to his friends, sounded remarkable in so dull and uneventful a place as that country-side. Pieces of rumor concerning it crept into the London papers subsequently, and we were most unwillingly become the figures in a tragic and heroic adventure.

We resolved, despite the promised respite, to pretermitt no one of the precautions, and Montgomery mounted guard at eight o'clock on the keep tower. As Sheppard and I sat over our wine we were interrupted by Mrs. Main, who had been greatly stirred by the visit of a justice. She came ostensibly with a question, but in reality to breathe the air of our central excitement.

"I am to give Williams his supper to-night, as last night, sir?" she asked.

I told her "No," and her wits wandered to the events of the day without more ado.

But presently she came back. "Then I'm not to prepare supper for Williams, sir?"

"Williams will not be sleeping here to-night," I replied. "He left at the usual hour—six o'clock."

Her face wore a blank look, as of one struggling with perplexity, and assuming that she had fears on

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her own account to combat, I went on, "You see, we shall be perfectly safe with the police looking after us."

"Oh, Lord, sir, 'tisn't that," she made answer, as though deprecating my reflection on her courage. "But Williams isn't gone, sir."

"But he is," said Sheppard. "I saw him myself two hours ago half-way to Llanellan."

Mrs. Main looked her incredulity. "If it wasn't his back I saw no more than two blessed minutes ago, I put it to you, whose was it, sir?"

I sat up, and we stared at each other. "Where was this?" I asked.

"I was leaving the kitchen for the pantry, sir, just preparatory with some dishes like, and the blinds being down against the window that faces the courtyard, I see Williams's shadow—leastways what I took to be Williams's—pass across the blind, sir."

"It couldn't be Williams," said I, after a pause. "Williams has never been in the castle since two o'clock; and, besides, the drawbridge is up."

"Did you see his face?" asked Sheppard.

"No, sir; it was on the blind like, but happening to have a question to put to him, I just drops the dishes on the sideboard, and I run to the door, but when I'd got it open Williams was gone."

"It was *not* Williams," I repeated, testily.

"What I took to be Williams, sir," corrected Mrs. Main, with gentle obstinacy.

"Did you hear any sound of footsteps?"

"No, sir, but then I was making a noise with the dishes like, and Williams walks very gentle."

"Oh, well," I murmured at length, "you must have been deceived, and if Williams was here, he has gone since, and at any rate he won't want his supper."

When the housekeeper had retired I found Sheppard watching me. "What do you make of it, Ned?"

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"I make nothing," I answered. "It's practically impossible for any one to get into the castle. We have had the bridge up nearly all day. But—you know my old adage, that it's better to be sure than sorry—we may as well have a look round."

"I agree with you," he said.

Taking a candle we made a tour of the castle rooms, and investigated all the corridors; peering into the dark corners. It was an arduous business, for I had hardly realized the number of passages and crannies to be explored. Presently, then, we both came to a stop on a simultaneous thought.

"This is really no use," I said.

"None whatever," assented he.

"It's quite impossible to exhaust all the possibilities of this house. And I still adhere to my previous notion, that Mrs. Main was hardly in a sufficiently pacific state to judge between shadows."

"I'm with you there," said Sheppard, cheerfully.

"Very well then, bed!" said I, and to bed we went, admirably tired with our excitement and our labors.

I must have been asleep for some hours when I awoke from dead unconsciousness with the presence of some one in the room oppressing me. Almost as I sat up I heard Montgomery's voice.

"Are you awake, Greatorex?"

"I am," I returned, "though what the devil you want spoiling a poor wretch's well-earned rest I—"

"Don't chaff," he broke in, earnestly. "There's some one about the house."

I sat still striving to dissipate the confusion of my brain. Somewhere, far off, I remembered that I had heard this before. But with a strenuous effort of the will I threw off the dwindling hands of sleep and got out of bed. "We'll go and see," I said. "What time is it?"

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"I don't know," said Montgomery, as I lit a candle with fumbling fingers. "But my watch is over. I think it's about twelve or one."

"Now, young man," I said, having pulled on some clothes, "what about this alarm of yours?"

"It was a noise—it woke me up," explained Montgomery. "Sheppard relieved me at eleven, and I turned in, feeling very sleepy. I thought I slept like a log, but something got on my nerves, I suppose. At any rate, it woke me up."

"My dear lad, what was it?" I asked, impatiently.

"It came from the back of the bed," he answered; "it was a sound of feet."

"Something within the walls," I argued; "mice—beetles."

Montgomery shook his head. "Come and listen," he pleaded.

I followed him. Certainly he was the least imaginative young man in the world, and it puzzled me that he should have taken this whim. Perhaps it was not fancy! Suddenly Mrs. Main's statement, which I had doubted and ridiculed, returned to my mind in a flow of memory.

Montgomery's room stood upon the back of the castle, and, like all the rooms which were in use, faced the park. It was a small, square chamber, lined, as had been practised throughout the castle, with oak. Montgomery pointed to the pillow. "My head was there," he explained. "Listen!"

I lay down upon the bed and rested. "There's nothing to be heard," said I.

"Wait," said Montgomery, eagerly.

A silence ensued. "Don't you hear anything?" he asked.

I shook my head. "My dear boy, it was fancy," I said, and was raising my head from the pillow when

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suddenly a slight sound struck upon my ears, and I paused in the act and in the centre of my speech. "I hear something now," I said. "But it's only the patter of rain."

Montgomery set his ear to the wall. "That's not rain," he whispered. He was right; it was not rain; it was the noise of feet falling lightly upon stone. At once I took fire.

"What is behind this oak?" I asked. "There must be some passage here." I sounded with my knuckles on the board. "It's hollow."

A careful inspection with the candle revealed a seam in the oak, which might mark the site of hinges; and together we pushed firmly on the panel. It fell back slowly, being, as I found afterwards, without lock or spring, and merely held in its place by disuse and dirt. Within, the light shone upon a black hole and a dark flight of stairs leading downward.

"We must see the end of this," said Montgomery, and hopped into the darkness like a frog. I followed. Below there was now silence; the footsteps had died away. The narrow flight in the wall continued for some thirty steps and brought us, as I reckoned, to the foundations of the castle. Here we were fetched up promptly by a blank wall of wood—no doubt a similar encasement of oak as that in which the panel above was set. Groping about we fumbled upon a latch, and opened the door quietly. The candle flared on the walls opposite. We were in the dark corridor leading to the treasure.

As this discovery flashed on me I heard once more the sound that I had detected in Montgomery's room—the sound of delicate footfalls on the stone flags. Blowing out the candle, and putting a detaining hand on Montgomery, I drew back into the niche of that secret place. The sounds drew nearer, dropping regu-

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larly on the air, and echoing faintly in the long tunnel. And then a figure, wrapped in darkness, but palpable to every sense save that of the sight, emerged, passed, and faded before us. The footsteps pattered away into the distance.

I waited a few moments, and then, stooping, shook off my boots, bidding my companion do the same. That done, we stepped out into the corridor and plunged into the blackness of the night.

The blood ran in my body like a mill-race, but left my brain clear and bright in eddies. I was not blind to the probabilities of this adventure, which had now stepped out of the supernatural and become merely human and prosaic. Here was one of our determined foes perambulating within the precincts of our hold, and even admitted to that privy place near which the hoard of treasure lay. Slowly, and with great caution, we followed. Our naked feet made no sound; but it was difficult to grope one's way in the darkness. Our direction lay round the castle walls, and towards the drum-towers; and it was upon the flight of stairs mounting to the guard-room in the northern tower that we came presently. The door at the top of this staircase stood ajar, and, proceeding with still greater care, we climbed up and looked through the chinks.

A lantern, newly lit and shedding a dull glow through the opaque glasses, was set upon the floor, and cast the long, black shadow of a man against the wall. He was standing near the short, deep embrasure that yawned in the massive stone walls of the drum-tower, scrutinizing the valley below. What could he be there for? As I wondered, turning over the circumstances in my excited mind, he stooped, and, picking up the lantern, thrust it into the window, waving it from side to side. I suppose this was in response to some signal from the valley, but I paid little heed to



HOOD IS FOUND IN THE TREASURE-CHAMBER

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it at the time, being suddenly interested in a recognition. It was Hood !

I will confess that the identification of that unmistakable lean body and black head filled me with a sudden disquietude of which it would have been hard to give the reason. The very silence of the man sowed fear and mistrust in my heart. And so it was that, instead of breaking from our hiding-place and seizing the impudent intruder, I put a hand on Montgomery and constrained him to retire with me into the lower passages. We concealed ourselves in one of the side-galleries, and there awaited Hood's return. For that he would return I had no doubt. Evidently, he and Sercombe communicated with each other by means of flashing lights ; and it was equally evident that Sercombe's signal must have been to postpone action. I could see pretty plainly the method Hood intended to adopt. He was to admit the marauders to the castle by lowering the drawbridge and raising the portcullis ; after which they would have the three of us at their mercy. But the presence of the police in the neighborhood had saved us from that fate for one night at least, and, thanks to Montgomery's quick ears, it would be strange if we did not manage to put another face on the position by the morrow.

I was right in my conjecture, for shortly afterwards we heard the returning feet sound along the stones. He passed the end of our passage, holding his lantern before him ; and when he had disappeared we hurried out into the corridor and sped after him. Once we saw the spot of light that glowed in the vicinity of that shadow pause and waver. I dare say that some sound had caught his ear, and he turned and listened. We shrank into the protection of the wall until the footsteps had resumed their way. By this time I had guessed his errand, or at least his destina-

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tion. He was bound for the treasure-chamber in the keep, and had probably come from there previously. Possibly it had been his hiding-place. Here again my assumption proved correct, and we watched him open the cupboard in the wall and vanish like an expert, lantern and all, into the abyss.

"We must take him to-night," said I to Montgomery. "It won't do to let him get out of range."

Montgomery nodded, and, cautiously approaching, pulled open the door in the wall. Drawing himself up, he clambered through the space, and slid down into the farther room, making wonderfully small noise for so huge a body. I followed. But Hood was not in the lower room—at least, there was no light to pierce the utter darkness; and, moreover, I think we both knew that he was in the loft above us. Together we crawled up the steps, and once more looked in through the friendly aperture of a door upon the chief of our bitter enemies. Hood, kneeling upon the floor, was bent over the chests which contained the treasure.

Suddenly he started and lifted his head. It may have been that the door creaked, or perhaps he caught the sound of our breathing. All I know is that the next moment, and just as Montgomery leaped forward at a stride upon him, he put out his arm, and with a swift movement overturned the lantern. The room was at once plunged in darkness—darkness so thick and gravelike that it was incredible. Eternal night dwelt and brooded in those rayless dungeons, and she resumed her empire greedily from that meek, usurping candle. Montgomery's rush carried him to the corner where the boxes lay, but he encountered no one; Hood by some slippery movement had glided away, and where he was in the solid darkness neither of us could say. I gathered this from the silence that ensued upon Montgomery's spring. I heard him pick

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himself up, and then there was a hush. I stood with my back against the door in a state of intense suspense. There came a slight soft sound, and a dagger whizzed past me and struck in the oak with a loud tang. I sprang forward, but my fist took the air. Montgomery, from his corner, made a rush towards me, and I heard another of those horrid "tangs" and an exclamation of pain. Then there fell silence again, and presently an invisible person seemed to pass before me. I thrust out my arms, and again a soft and slender form touched me gently, and there came the clang and clatter of a knife upon the wall, pinning my coat-sleeve to the wood-work. But upon that there bore down upon us the sprawling form of Montgomery, and two people were fighting upon the floor before me. Tap, tap, tap went the horrid knife upon the floor, and then silence again, broken only by heavy noises in the throat. With formidable fears in my breast, I struck a match, casting a thread of light upon the scene of the struggle. Hood lay in Montgomery's arms, crumpled like a snake whose back is broken, one hand (which held a knife) stretched inert along the floor, his head thrown back, his face white through its sallow discoloration, and his eyelids lowered over his strange eyes.

"Good God! you have killed him!" said I.

Montgomery looked doubtful. "I don't think so," he panted. "But he was the very devil to tackle with that knife of his. I may have squeezed too hard. Something did crack, but—"

I pulled him aside. "Light the lantern, old chap," I said. "I believe you would have done a damned good thing if you had killed him."

Hood fell loosely to the floor as Montgomery moved his arms, and opened his eyes, which fell on me sharp and ardent, burning with a violent light. A reptile

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takes long a-dying and has many lives. I could have sworn Montgomery hadn't killed him. He sat up.

"You have me, sir," he remarked, with all his polite servility.

"Yes, my man," said I, cheerfully, "I think we may go so far as to say that."

Hood turned on his side, and I kicked the dagger out of his reach.

"If you don't mind, sir, I should like to be eating something," he said, quietly. "I've had nothing all day."

He looked towards the treasure-chests, and I perceived upon one of these set forth the preparations for a meal. I laughed. "You know the house well, I see, Hood."

"Yes, sir," said he. "I've done a good deal of foraging, sir, at one time and another."

"Very well; have your meal," I agreed. "Any bones broken?"

"Thank you, sir; none, sir. A bit stiff, sir, that's all."

"Then I think we'll leave you to your supper, Hood," I said. I examined the candle in the lantern; it would last some hours. Ere it burned out I would revisit the prisoner with some supplies.

"You are not going to keep him here?" asked Montgomery, in some surprise.

I nodded. "For the present."

"Oh, this is hell!" said the lad.

"Precisely," said I. "And hell is what Mr. Hood shall have a foretaste of. It's a good thing to be prepared, Hood."

"Yes, sir," said Hood.

And that was the only remark that fell from him on hearing the horrid fate to which I seemed to condemn him. We passed out, and I turned the key in the lock.

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"He'll stifle in there," expostulated Montgomery.

"Oh, dear, no!" said I. "It's not the first time the keep has been used as a dungeon, though I dare say it will be the last."

I think the boy took a gruesome fear of me on that occasion, regarding me with horror as a malevolent and barbarous tyrant; but in truth I had a purpose in my seeming malice, as will appear.

CHAPTER XIV

SERCOMBE OFFERS TERMS

WE had now a prisoner of war, lawfully taken in the flagrant act, and must consider what to do with him. For myself, I had already solved the riddle in my own way. To say the truth, I was getting a distaste for the adventure. It implied too many hard knocks, too rough a usage for a summer holiday; and, what was much worse, it entailed upon me a grave responsibility which I began to feel myself unable to bear. It was well enough for Sheppard or Montgomery, but the *onus* of this vendetta rested upon me, and I had already had an introduction to its tragic side. It seemed to me that the drift of these lawless events was wholly in the direction of murder. The word was ugly enough, but it must be faced. Murder is what the law would call it, and murder was what it came near being at the best. The capture of Hood, then, opened a road of escape, and I had already resolved to employ it. Of course it would have been possible still to have surrendered the treasure to the Crown, or to have handed it into the possession of Sercombe's party; but though I was reluctant to continue the bloody struggle, I was certainly indisposed to haul down my flag. If it were to be peace, it should be peace with honor. And the body of Hood gave me my means.

I was able, after some argument, to carry my point with the others. They had both a kindly fancy for

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the fighting, and were inclined to take my announcement in a chafallen manner. But I explained that I was making no decision of myself; that I was one of three, and that I had merely offered the suggestion as my contribution to the counsels of war. Upon that I added the very cogent reasons which I had prepared in favor of my advice, and the end of the talk was that they accepted the plans I unfolded.

To execute my scheme it was necessary to see Sercombe. But first I must pay a visit to the prisoner, who, by the time we had arrived at a conclusion, had lain in the blackness of that abominable dungeon for five hours. Sheppard, indeed, had been eager to interview him, and, upon hearing of the capture, had at once betaken himself to the keep. He was absent half an hour, but I did not inquire what he had been doing. I merely looked at him interrogatively when he returned, which he did, wearing a graver face than was usual to him. Noting the inquiry in my glance, he shook his head.

"That man is dangerous," he said—"abnormally dangerous."

"Montgomery and I have occasion to know that," I replied. "He is a snake—that is the substantive; and I doubt very much whether we can kill him."

"I have my doubts whether we can even scotch him," said Sheppard, dryly, and then dismissed the subject.

Yet my conversation with Hood later was very commonplace, and marked by no particular points. He kept his customary face of obsequiousness, and gave me the briefest replies to my interrogations. I was specially exercised in my mind as to the manner of his entrance into the castle. For all his dexterity and cunning, I could not see how, carefully watched as our fortress was, he had managed to gain admittance over

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the drawbridge and through the closed portcullis. At the question, which was delivered point-blank, he turned his luminous eyes upon me and regarded me with a shifty smile—the shadow of a smile, betokening no amusement.

“I don’t mind telling you, sir,” he murmured, “though it’s not what I would say to most gentlemen. But you have been a gentleman, sir, throughout, and I should be proud to have served you. I came with the party in the morning, sir.”

“What?” said I; “you were with the storming-party?”

“Yes, sir. Seeing you engaged, I crept away. I know the house, sir, being with my poor master so long. And I don’t hold with violence where you can do without it.”

I opened my eyes. The man’s plans were conceived with excellent craft. It would be the last thing I should have thought of, and yet it was so simple to take advantage of the confusion and secrete himself upon the battlements after his allies had fled.

“You are a rascal, Hood,” I returned, not without admiration. “But you are a damned clever rascal.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Hood.

“Yes,” I continued, “you have had a smart shot for it, but your game is up, my man. Clever as you are, I have you caged, and I think Captain Sercombe and his scoundrels are further from the gold than ever.”

“It looks like it, sir,” admitted Hood.

I looked round upon the dark and grimy walls. “This is a mean hole for a man of your parts to lie festering in,” I said, “but I see no choice before you. You have made your own bed, and you must lie in it. A man might rot here and drop into the bones of a skeleton without sound or sense of the outside world.

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The bodies of many captives have decayed within these gloomy walls."

"Have they, indeed, sir?" says Hood, politely. He sat upon one of the oaken cases, his eyes bent upon me earnestly, his body almost couchant for a spring. I could have believed the man was preparing a sudden assault upon me but that I knew he carried no weapon, and I was of stronger and bigger build than he. But apparently nothing of the sort was in his mind; it was merely the deference due to my position which he proclaimed in that attention. That mask of the trained servant concealed his individuality now as ever. Never once had I seen the veil lifted and the real man exposed and naked to the light of day.

"Hood," said I, almost with a sigh of despair at his imperturbable calm, "do you want to stay here indefinitely?"

"Certainly not, sir; by your leave, sir," he answered, promptly.

"Then upon what terms shall I offer you release?" His eyes dropped and there was silence. "Remember," said I, "that no one outside ourselves is aware of your existence here. You may be hidden here till the day of judgment and none be the wiser, and even then your bones will scarcely see the light of day. What do you propose?"

Hood shifted his gaze to my face. "Anything that's convenient to you, sir. I'd rather leave it to you, sir."

I experienced a strange impulse to cry out with some emotion; but whether this was astonishment, anger, or a mere sense of the ridiculous, or whether it was a combination of all three, I could not have said. I rose from my seat, controlling my voice with difficulty.

"Very well, Hood," I said. "It shall be left to me,

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as you suggest." And with that I stalked out of the dungeon and locked the door.

It was impossible to transact business with such a man. I felt the need of reciprocity; whereas dealing with Hood reminded me of nothing so much as of digging at a piece of rubber that will fly gently back when the pressure is removed. And so it must be with Sercombe that I should arrange the details of a compromise, or at least the terms of a truce, if not of a permanent peace.

Sercombe was absent from the inn, but I learned that he was in Raymond; and, taking our horses, Montgomery and I rode across to the little town in the early hours of the afternoon. We ran upon the captain himself in the High Street, and as we were making for the Swan to put up our nags. He welcomed us cheerily, and, mopping his red forehead (for the day was very sultry), invited us to drink with him.

"Just stepping across to the Swan," said he. "Come along and put up your toes. Ecuador was nothing to this."

I accepted with a nod, and presently we were seated in the commercial room, by the window that looked out upon the court-yard, sipping a cooling draught.

"I prefer," says the captain, hospitably, "to drink in company rather than alone. And that's the distinction between a drinker and a drunkard, Master Montgomery. Take it from me." With which he threw back his head and took a long pull at his glass. "I have not felt so warm since I was in Abyssinia," he remarked.

"Ah," said I, "you are right, captain. Hot is the word. I'm sure from my heart I envy Hood."

Sercombe pricked up his ears, regarding me inquisitively.

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"Yes," I went on, leaning back in my chair ; " cool, damp floors, cold stone walls, and neither the sun nor the moon to smite him—that's my notion of comfort this weather."

Sercombe paused in the act of drinking, and put down his glass. "What is this conundrum, Mr. Greatorex?" he asked, in a puzzled way.

"'Tis no conundrum," I replied, airily. "By the way, where did you say your friend Hood was?"

He looked at me under his red eyebrows. "Mr. Hood," he said, "is on business of his own. He is a gentleman at large, but he has affairs."

"No doubt—no doubt," I remarked, amiably. "This is an excellent cooling drink, captain."

Sercombe puffed at his cigar, continuing to study our faces. Upon Montgomery's, I dare say, he perceived a smile of triumph ; for he suddenly put down his cigar and folded his hands on his head.

"I fancy we've got to come to an understanding, Mr. Greatorex," he said, slowly. "I'm slow of wit, no doubt, but I begin to see daylight. But I will call on you to observe that I am not responsible for Mr. Hood's movements."

"I have never imagined so," I answered. "On the contrary."

A frown, rather than a scowl, crossed his face. "Has it ever fallen to you, Mr. Greatorex, to be tied in a leash ; to be— But I reckon as a barrister you are not particular about your cases. You have messed up with many a dirty attorney."

"You felicitate me too much," said I, with a bow. "I am unfortunate enough never to have had a brief."

"Ah !" said the captain, and was for a moment silent. "You have Hood?" he asked.

The man's intelligence was quick ; his wits were plying even more quickly.

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"We have the honor to possess a prisoner of war," said I.

"I congratulate you, sir," said he, "upon an event I had always anticipated." Then again he was quiet, seeming absorbed in thought, but suddenly he sat up. "See here, Mr. Greatorrex," he said, "I will be frank with you. This thing has not gone according to my notions, and that's flat. As for this folly of exploiting the castle from inside, I put no faith in it from the outset. A fair siege and a square siege is more to my taste. But you let up on us with that damned moat of yours, and those sharp eyes. I will confess I never saw a position held more keenly. But that's no use to us; and I tell you that I'm sick of it. Look; I'll tell you how I stand. I have my men—they're mine, mind you, and not Hood's—and I've no stomach to give it all up for nothing. But, between you and me, it's no champagne supper to defend the castle, and lose half your natural life in blows and strategies. Therefore, what do you say to terms?"

"Terms?" I echoed. "To ransom Hood."

He ejaculated an oath. "Let the beast rot," he declared; "I'm talking of ourselves."

"Captain Sercombe," said I, gently, "I knew Mr. Hood in this business ere I knew you, and to my idea he was the prime mover in the conspiracy. Let us say that he is gone, and what have we to fear?"

Sercombe looked extremely blank, and I could see that my words had struck a vital spot.

"Hood," he said, "has done nothing but blunder; and besides—"

But he got no further, breaking off suddenly, and as though with an effort.

"If that be so," said I, rising, "let us see how Captain Sercombe will manage matters."

"Hold hard," he interrupted. "Sit down awhile,

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sir. You have sprung this affair on me. I must take my counsel. Come, what do you say to going shares?"

I lifted my brows. "You are not serious?" I remarked.

He glanced furtively at Montgomery. "I will take one-third," he said, "and no questions asked."

"My dear sir," said I, in amazement, "you embarrass me. Your terms are too liberal from a vanquished foe. I could not accept such generosity. And now, if you will allow me, as I have an appointment with Mr. Hood shortly, I must—"

But this alarmed him, as I could perceive, for he changed color, and put out a finger to catch my arm.

"I will stand in with all of you!" he cried.

I smiled, but before I could reply an interruption fell in the entrance of the police-sergeant, Jones, whom we had met before. He saluted us, and I made an inquiry as to his investigations.

"I am on a track, sir," he declared; "I can say no more," and eyed Sercombe attentively.

"You've not struck those gypsies, I hear," said Sercombe, who had resumed his cigar with an appearance of nonchalance.

"No, sir."

"They're here to-day and somewhere else to-morrow. I hardly expected you'd find them. They nose a scent pretty soon."

"I'm on a track, sir," repeated Jones.

"Glad to hear it," nodded the captain.

I went out with the sergeant, but Sercombe called to me.

"What is it?" I asked, standing in the doorway.

An anxious look troubled Sercombe's eye. "I have made you a proposition, Mr. Greatorrex."

"That's true," said I, gravely, "and I will ask you,

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captain, to better it. But excuse me, my time is limited.

"You give me short shrift," exclaimed he, with a bitter laugh.

"Oh no," I said; "but I dare say you will have time to think over it between now and nine o'clock. If you can see your way to a more equitable adjustment, captain, perhaps you would be good enough to let me know by then?"

At that I left him, and caught up with Montgomery, who had gone ahead with Jones.

"Excuse me, sir," said Jones, politely, "but are you a very old friend of Captain Sercombe's?"

"Why, no," said I, "I have not known him long."

"Ah," said he, "an odd gentleman, sir. Mr. Hood, of The Woodman, he knows some queer stories about him."

"He says so, does he?" said I.

Jones emphatically wagged his head. "Very queer," he added. From which it appeared to me that Mr. Jones might not be quite so smart as he seemed, and also that Mr. Hood was even smarter. What his object might have been in spreading an evil reputation for Sercombe I could not guess, but that he *had* an object, and a material one, I did not doubt for a moment.

Though I had introduced the idea to Sercombe's notice, and the introduction had had its effect, I had not yet given shape and substance to my plan of setting off the one scoundrel against the other. I foresaw that I could improve my own position very substantially by this system of balance, and I determined to go now forthright to Hood on the same errand. He had failed me in the morning, but perhaps he would have grown wiser in the course of the day's imprisonment. There is nothing like solitude and the oppor-

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tunity of reflection to bring a man to prudence. And now, too, I had seen Sercombe, and had a genuine offer to consider. I came to the conclusion that, after all, Hood would not prove obdurate, and that the end of the warfare was almost in sight.

In some such mood as this I made the journey to the keep, flattering myself with the success of my diplomacy, and complacently contemplating an honorable settlement, which would rid us of our troubles, banish these wretched intruders, and leave us to the comfortable enjoyment of our share in the treasure of the Vyvians.

Dinner was over. The clock in the hall had chimed half-past eight. I expected Sercombe at nine o'clock, and must hurry to secure the interview before that. I entered the dungeon carefully and locked the door behind me, as was my custom. Then, turning, I cast the light towards the boxes upon which Hood had sat.

He was not there. Hastily I flashed the lantern round the walls. There was no sign of Hood. The dungeon was empty.

CHAPTER XV

THE GALLERY, AND WHAT BEFELL ME

I STARED at the blank stones, but they returned no sign from their unavailing grayness. The silence began to speak in that gloomy place. Flickering shadows spread and faded on the walls; and then, recovering myself, I put down the lantern and considered. First, I put the key in my pocket, a definite precaution which was to influence strangely the history of this narrative. It was not conceivable that any one could have opened the heavy door when it was locked; yet the prisoner was gone. "If he is gone," said I, aloud, in order to reassure myself, "he must needs have gone by some hole." That was incontrovertible. I decided, too, that the means of escape must lie within the dungeon. Once more I inspected the huge oaken door, and shook my head. Was there any flaw in the wood? Perchance there was a secret spring in a panel? I went over the surface carefully, but found nothing.

"Very well," said I, "I will unriddle this or be hanged for a felon," and I set to work upon the walls. Inch by inch I passed the masonry under my scrutiny, but made no discovery. "I will go over it again," I declared desperately, and resumed my work from the beginning. I had not reached a point very far from the door on this second round of investigation when my glance slid off at a venture and almost mechanically rested upon the treasure-chests. Some-

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thing unfamiliar in their appearance vaguely persisted in my thoughts. I left off fumbling with the wall, and stood gazing at them. They took my eyes with interest; and, crossing the room, I shed the light upon the cases, fingering the gold pieces under the broken lid. One, two, three—they stood exactly as— No, that was the point. They had been moved!

With a new zest I examined the floor, and, sure enough, one of these chests had been pulled out from the wall as far as its own width. I peeped over it, illuminating the space beyond. The slab of stone which the box had covered was like the other flags that made the floor of the dungeon. I leaned lower, and, sitting cross-ways on the chest, pushed the slab with my foot. It clanked dully to the kick of my heel; but (what was even more amazing to me) it seemed to shudder and tremble beneath me. Fully aroused to action, I flung myself over and alighted with both feet hard upon the flooring. In another moment I was tipped forward, and felt myself falling precipitately upon my face. Catching at the chest with one hand, I saved myself, but in the effort the lantern fell from my hand and went out.

Slowly I groped in the darkness, and struck a match, relighting the candle. Then I turned to the slab of stone.

It lay open, displaced, one end protruding upward, and, as I saw, had twisted on some kind of axle. Below was disclosed a great mouth of darkness.

"Come," said I to myself, "I think I know where friend Hood is, and this begins to get interesting."

I felt in my pocket, where my revolver lay safely, and, seizing the candle, plunged into the evil-looking hole. A stairway of stone ran downward, but very steeply, and I had the utmost difficulty in preventing myself from pitching forward against the rough ma-

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sonry of the opposite wall. The walls brushed me upon either side as I descended, so narrow was the funnel. Down, down I went, until presently I reached a sort of landing, which broadened into a little irregular chamber. Here a ray of light caught my eye, and I followed it till I happened upon a small door in the wall. A huge key was in the lock, but the bolt was not turned, and by wrenching hard I forced the door open. I now looked down upon the waters of the moat, in which my tiny flame danced in the growing darkness.

After a little consideration I saw where I was. This must be a sally-port, giving access to the fosse. Indeed, the water lapped the lowermost step upon which I stood. Was it by this way that Hood had escaped? It seemed certain, and, if so, there was nothing for it but to pocket my chagrin, go back, and communicate my melancholy news to my friends. Retracing my steps, I shut the door, and proceeded to reascend the stairway. But in the act of doing so I paused, for the lantern flashing on the obscure corners revealed to me a second flight of steps leading still downward from this level. Without hesitation, and moved by some excitement, I abandoned my first intention, and plunged down this new well.

The second flight led downward even farther than the first, and must, I reckoned, have brought me under the foundations of the castle. At the bottom I was in a square, damp hole, and before me stretched a tunnel, the height of a tall man, and very black and miry. The thought of entering upon that mysterious and horrid gallery gave me a momentary pause; but, dissipating my forebodings, I marched forward, and was soon buried in the bowels of the earth.

The tunnel was barely six feet in height, and I was obliged to walk with a slight stoop. To add to my

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discomfort the roof, which was rudely put together of huge stones, was very wet, and water trickled at intervals on my head. Moreover, I was being gradually coated with filth from the sticky nature of the clay through which the gallery was driven, and which had, in the course of time, percolated between the stones. But I was now resolved to see the end of the adventure, and so I pushed on, undeterred by the inconveniences, and almost oblivious of my fears. A sense of suffocation accompanied me, but soon that feeling wore off, and I strode along at a sharper pace, lighting my way as well as I could with the lantern, and stumbling at intervals over the débris of earth and stone which cumbered the footway. I must have gone some three hundred yards in this fashion, when I began to find the passage growing lighter. Some time afterwards I discovered ahead, but shining as it seemed from a great distance, a point of brightness that grew as I advanced. This was undoubtedly the mouth of the tunnel, and, assured now of reaching some goal, and no longer oppressed by the terror of that dismal alley, I increased my pace, moving forward to the light with a cheerful alacrity.

Thus I drew near to the jaws of that exit, and came presently from the gallery itself into a wider space of cavern facing the heavens and rained upon by stars. The moon, with her horns pointing to the zenith, lay along the east, rising, immeasurably calm. About me the hollow, shadowed and hidden under the thick autumn foliage, was very gently luminous. The peace of the night rested upon the Gwent.

Yet I had now to determine my position, and I will confess that I could not make the least guess of my whereabouts. A noise of water ran in my ears, coming from my right hand, and towards this I pushed my way. The trees were close, and the undergrowth

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of bracken and bushes rendered my advance very gradual, but by degrees I arrived at my point, and found (what I had lately begun to suspect) that the sound rose from the little brook, which here descended the face of a steep slope in a pleasant gushing waterfall. A great gout of water, flung from the stones, dashed in my face quite merrily; and, heated with the confinement of the gallery and my long and troublesome passage, I stooped and bathed my face and hands in the running stream. I now began to see where I was. This was a point in the Gwent below the castle, where the brook left the park, and where the hill fell suddenly away into the valley, clothed with a dense forest, and traversed by few save charcoal-burners.

I reflected that this was a valuable adit to the castle, and then upon that fell like a blow the second thought—that Hood might have chosen this mode of escape, in which case the gallery was a drawback to us rather than an advantage. And yet it appeared ridiculous to suppose that a fugitive would hunt about to follow the longer and more arduous route of flight. On the whole I decided that Hood must have fled by the sally-port and across the moat. Anyhow, he was gone, and it behooved us to renew our defences and concert our plans afresh.

As I reached this conclusion in my reverie, with the sound of the waters pleasantly dulling my ears, I seemed to catch sight of a reflection flashing black among the tangled lights of the pool below me. The next moment I was hurled headlong, and when I was awake to my position ten seconds later the blood was drumming in my ears, my temples throbbed with pain, and two men were kneeling on my chest.

"Let him be, Charaxos! Loose his throat, you fool!" said a voice which had a familiar effect upon



GREATOREX IS CAPTURED BY THE GREEKS

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me. I staggered to a sitting position, the two ruffians holding me, and stared about me.

"Very sorry, sir," said Hood; "hope they didn't choke you too much, sir. 'Twas a near go."

I gasped, considering him. "I came to bring your supper, Hood," I stammered, and to this day I am glad to think I took the reverse with so much coolness. For it was no mean feat, I can assure you, with the breath out of my body, and my wits wandering, and my head ringing from an ugly blow.

"Thank you, sir," said Hood, with his damnable effrontery. "Thank you kindly, sir, I'm sure."

I could have sworn the man was more of a gentleman than a valet, and he was certainly more of a scoundrel than either. But, having discharged this civility, he turned his back and paid me no further attention, merely issuing an order to his cutthroats. The two dirty Greeks, one of whom was my squinting acquaintance, marched me along without more ado; and if I had considered the possibility of escape, the fancy was dispelled by the presence of two more besides Hood himself, which I discovered when we began to move. I said nothing, keeping my eyes wide open and my brain as ready as might be; nor was any word spoken upon either side until we drew up at The Woodman, stopping before which Hood requested me to enter in his most conventionally hospitable manner.

I was much exercised in my mind as to the use these brigands could have for me, but as yet the situation was too novel to allow me consecutive thought. I was led into a large barnlike building beyond the inn, and reached by a flight of wooden steps outside. The room was large and airy, and had evidently not been used for a granary these many years. Indeed, it bore the plain marks of recent habitation; and it came across

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me that maybe this had been the hiding-place of the Greek sailors.

Into this cell the Greeks thrust me, and, locking the door behind them, disappeared, leaving me to my own reflections. That these were not cheerful I need not assure you. Although I was but partially awakened to my misfortune, I had no difficulty in seeing whither it tended. Hood, as I now perceived, had discovered the secret gallery, and had made his escape by that, and not by the sally-port. But why was he lingering about the entrance to the passage? And how came he in company with his allies? I had not contemplated this problem for five minutes ere the secret of my capture dawned on me, and, I will confess, fairly turned my stomach. Through the gallery lay the one road to the treasure, and Hood and I were the only two people in the drama who knew that. My seizure meant, then, that the way was now clear for him and his devilish enterprise. The treasure of the Vyvians was at his mercy.

In these desperate considerations I spun out the better part of an hour, at the end of which time the key creaked suddenly in the door, and Sercombe entered, bearing a heavy lamp. This he set down upon the rude bench table, and turned to me, seating himself in a chair, and disposing himself with comfort.

"I regret, Mr. Greatorrex," said he, suavely, and pulling at his cigar, with his hat on the back of his head—"I regret that I am somewhat late to my appointment with you. It was to have been nine o'clock, I fancy?" said he, interrogating me civilly.

Now I recalled what, to say the truth, I had completely forgotten in the adventure which I had experienced, that I had myself named such an hour to receive the capitulation of the captain. It maddened me to remember the fact, and my triumphant diplo-

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macy of the afternoon, in the face of my dismal failure and this bland and sprawling creature. But I was not to take a rebuff with my ears down, and so I spoke up as calmly and as politely as himself.

"You are right," said I. "Nine o'clock it was. But, like you, I have been unavoidably delayed. So please don't apologize."

A smile lit up his face (and he was always best when he smiled) and his eyes twinkled.

"I begin to see, Mr. Greatorex," he said, "how it is that you have come so near winning this campaign."

"I have no doubt I shall win it yet," I returned.

"No doubt," he replied, cordially. "But forgive me, Mr. Greatorex. I see you have no refreshments here, and I am sure you are in need of them. It was unpardonable of Hood." So saying he rose and went to the door, shouting some order to a man below, whom I judged I must consider my sentry. Presently, and before the captain resumed his seat, Hood himself entered, bearing in his hands a tray containing a bottle of whiskey, a carafe of water, and some glasses. He cast an eye of scrutiny on Sercombe, who lolled once more in his chair, but he said nothing, and retired, breathing the innkeeper, to the door. Sercombe filled two glasses.

"Allow me, Mr. Greatorex," he said, and puffed for some minutes in silence. Indeed, it was I who first resumed the conversation.

"I presume, Captain Sercombe," I said, "that you have come to tell me that you do not accept my offer."

"Precisely," he owned, taking his cigar from his mouth. "That is exactly the position, Mr. Greatorex. I don't know how you guessed it, but there it is. I do not feel justified in consideration of my relations with Mr. Hood in accepting your proposals."

"Then," I said, bluffly, but keeping up the farce,

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"I see no reason for our continuing this interview, and as I am somewhat tired, if you will excuse me—"

"I would not trespass upon you in the slightest," he interrupted. "But I had an idea that perhaps we might arrive at a compromise." I said nothing, for I had not the faintest notion of what he was driving at.

"You are aware," he continued, in his pleasant voice, "that there is an access to the dungeon in which, justifiably or otherwise (I express no opinion), you confined our host."

I bowed, and sipped my whiskey-and-water.

"You are also aware," he went on, "that now you, the only other person who has knowledge of that private road, are—let us say—enjoying the hospitality of The Woodman, the treasure-chests are not likely to remain long where they are."

He waited on my answer, as if something anxious, but I merely nodded, and watched him. Captain Sercombe, from his comfortable attitude, bent his red brows at me. "May I ask you, Mr. Greatorex," he said, quite coolly, "if you happen to have locked the door of the dungeon?"

For answer, and without giving the matter a thought, I produced the key, which, as I have already narrated, I had put in my pocket.

Sercombe's eye lightened. He rose and went to the door, opening it and glancing into the darkness. Then he returned, and drew his chair nearer to mine.

"You made me a proposition this afternoon," he said, earnestly.

"I did," said I, "which I now beg to retract."

"It was not good enough," he went on, paying no attention to my sarcasm—"not nearly good enough. But what do you say if I make one to you now?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I am at your mercy," I said.

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"Mr. Greatorex," he said, severely, "I think you sometimes forget that I am a gentleman."

"I forget nothing," said I, "but then I remember everything."

Sercombe uttered a hoarse laugh. His laughter was very discordant with his voice.

"I envy you your powers of ease," he said; "I am pretty good, but I admit you beat me. But come, I am making you a proposition. What do you say?"

"I have already said it."

"I see I will get no more change out of you," he said, soberly. "But I know a man to trust when I see him. That has been my safeguard, Mr. Greatorex. And I know a man to distrust, though sometimes it is unavoidable—" He broke off. "Your friends don't know where you went to-night?" he asked, suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"If the dungeon door is locked," he continued, leaning towards me confidentially, but paying no attention to my rejoinder, "it is impossible that they can get into it."

"Two and two are four," I answered.

"But if your friends had the key," he went on, growing very earnest, "what would happen? I imagine that they would open the door, find the bird flown, and perhaps the entrance to the secret passage disclosed."

This began to interest me. What was the rascal's purpose?

"Well?" I put in.

He lowered his voice, which conveyed a certain effect of fear to my mind.

"In which case the treasure would remain in the possession of the castle."

"You speak like a book of Euclid," I returned, after

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a pause. "And now, captain, let me ask, in my turn, what proposition are you making to me?"

He considered for a moment. "There are three of you," he said. "But I confess I cannot reckon my friend Montgomery. Let us say two, then. I am willing to go halves with you; in which case, as you will see, there is a quarter for yourself."

My watch ticked on my stomach so that I could hear it distinctly. At the end of some seconds I looked at Sercombe. He was lying back in his chair and had his glass to his nose. A strange confusion of liking and distaste assailed me.

"You would betray your associates," I said, dryly.

"Pardon me," said the captain, "we are not here to pass criticisms on morals. And, if it comes to that, what are we all? I see no pin-prick between us. I do not invite your conclusions on my conduct; I have the honor to make you a proposal."

The rascal leaned back in his chair and watched me with a curious air of satisfaction. Indeed, his complacency was well-grounded, and I could not but admit to myself that he was making me a handsome offer. His distrust or his fear of Hood was stronger than his greed, and it was to that we owed this unexpected intercession, when Fate had turned clean against us. Here was I, a prisoner, and with no possibility of escape; the treasure lay at the mercy of these vagabonds; and even at this moment the pieces might be slipping through Hood's loving fingers. Assuredly I should be a fool, I thought, to refuse Sercombe's compromise. He must certainly have made the proposal in good faith; for all I was invited to do was to surrender the key—a key which could be of no possible use to him, now that the subterranean entrance to the dungeon had been discovered. I withdrew it from my pocket. He nodded confidentially.

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"That is all I ask," he said.

"And I?" I queried.

"You shall be at liberty at the earliest opportunity I can find," he returned. "Observe, Mr. Greatorrex, that I am taking a great risk. I am depending upon your word."

"If I give it," I replied, "you may depend upon it."

"Yes, yes," said the captain, "I know that. I run a risk, and you have yet to learn how great a risk. Unless this be carefully managed there will be fighting—and bloody fighting—Mr. Greatorrex. We have only been skirmishing so far."

"You will warn my companions?" I asked.

"I will see that they pay a visit to their prisoner," said he; "and I reckon they will want little warning after that."

"You may take the key," said I, after a pause. But at that moment a slight sound, as of soft feet upon the creaking stairway, reached us. Sercombe whitened visibly, and looked uneasily at the door. There was a moment's silence between us, and then he spoke.

"It is better that I should leave you now," he said, hurriedly. "We can settle this to-morrow morning." And, showing clear signs of discomposure, he left the barn.

As for me, I sat with the key in my hand considering. I thought I could put a name on the owner of those steps.

CHAPTER XVI

I MAKE MY ESCAPE

SERCOMBE was not so good as his word. So far from completing the bargain on the morrow, he never came near me, and I passed the day quite alone, save for the occasional visits of one of the Greeks bringing my food. I began to have a very intelligible view of the situation. Sercombe had been frightened off the arrangement he had contemplated by the fear of his companion. Or, if that were not so, though I was now quite prepared to credit it, he deemed it wiser to postpone the adventure still further, in which case I might still keep my hopes alive and nourish an ambition of final success. But the truth was that each day lost was so much gained towards the accomplishment of Hood's object; and even as I sat and gnawed my fingers and reflected in this doleful mood the treasure was fast leaving the castle, passing into the possession of alien and bloody hands.

There was yet another alternative, about which I could not make up my mind. Hood might have bought the allegiance of his traitorous associate, and, if so, I wished them both joy of their bargain together. I would trust neither scoundrel beyond the reach of my arms or the audit of my ears, and I was pretty sure that neither would trust the other. Their whole association rested upon a mutual compact of greed, and it was odds but, the gold once under their hands, they would fall out in some mortal strife, according to

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the ancient proverb. If that should happen, perhaps, according to the ancient proverb, we, as representing honest men as nearly as possible in the circumstances, might come by our own, or, speaking more properly, some one else's own. For the present I had gained nothing, and lay, a disconsolate prisoner, in that airy cell, guarded by watches of the Greeks. So far as I could determine, we, the defenders of the castle and the treasure, were in a bad position, and there was nothing for it on my part but resignation with as civil a grace as might be. I had already taken account of the defences of my prison, and saw little prospect of escape. But I will confess that throughout the first day of my captivity I was somewhat under the influence of hope, and hourly expected a conference with Sercombe. This, as you may imagine, drew my attention from the immediate scrutiny of my surroundings. But upon the morning of the second day, when Sercombe still failed to visit me, I cast about for other means of escape.

First of all, I examined the barn very carefully. It was a huge building, and rose at the apex to a height of fifteen feet or more. The sides were of wood, but the top was composed of a skeleton of rafters, thickly coated with thatch. Two windows shone on the room, one at the back part and away from the door, the other inserted in one of the remaining walls. The door was, of course, kept locked, but by screwing my face against the side-window and craning my neck I could see the figure of a man on guard, evidently at the foot of the ladder. There was little chance of breaking out this way. The second window gave on a low-lying stable at the back, and beyond that there were the great trees and cool deeps of the forest. It was securely barred and fastened, and that, from all appearances, quite newly. The second exploration

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seemed to offer no more encouragement than the first. But I was not yet resigned to defeat, and, sitting down upon the floor, I fell to thinking, mechanically opening a small penknife which was in my pocket, and paring my nails. I do not know if I were conscious of the act, but I remember that it was quite a long time, and when I had grown almost desperate in my counsels, that the advantage of this tiny weapon occurred to me. The wooden walls were not higher than six or seven feet, and above them, as I have explained, rose the superstructure of thatch to the pinnacle of the roof. I paused in my occupation and rose quickly. By standing on a chair, I could easily reach the thatch between the rafters, and without a momentary hesitation I plunged my knife into the mass of reeds. Sharp as a razor, the small blade cut through the straw at a stroke, with a slight rasping noise. My blood flowed in a strong stream of excitement. Here, surely, was a road to the outer air.

But this was a venture to be essayed by night, and after my jailers had retired for the evening. Consequently I put aside the knife, and waited very impatiently for the fall of dusk. It was not until ten o'clock at night that I dared to make my experiment. By that time my supper had been cleared, and the Greeks had been gone for an hour. The barn was in solid darkness, which was all the better for my purpose; and, getting upon my chair, I set to work at once among the straw of the thatch. If any one should come in from this point onward my adventure would be hopeless. I should stand confessed in my task, and doubtless be doomed forthwith to a more secure and less comfortable prison. Therefore the need of haste was the greater, and with fingers and knife I sheared through and tore asunder the thatch with the utmost celerity. The job was none too easy, and I sweated

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at the work, with my head buried under the débris of the straw, and my throat choking with the dry and rotten stubble. Yet I had worked hard and fast enough to have opened a hole two feet through the thatch in a couple of hours. Through this the night lowered dark and sombre upon me.

There was now no necessity for delay ; indeed, the necessity was all for instant action. I listened at the door and window for sounds of the sentry, but I could hear nothing. He might be asleep; at any rate, he lay upon the farther side of the barn, and I might hope to escape his notice by breaking over the stables into the wood. Hastening back I got upon the chair, and, pulling myself up by the rafters, gradually drew to the level of the hole. My head once outside, I breathed deeply of the purer air. Then, dragging up the rest of my body, I dropped gently to the ground beyond. It was a deeper fall than I had anticipated, and I came down with a certain clatter. But, resting a moment in the shadows, I heard nothing ; no alarm was raised ; so, creeping to the stable, I climbed softly upon the roof and clambered across the eaves in the direction of the forest.

Suddenly a small noise arrested me, but ere I could collect my senses to determine it a dark body crept round a corner of the roof and grappled with me. I seized it fiercely, resolved to do battle for my liberty with all the strength at my command, and together we rolled and struggled on the housetop. Then my opponent gave a shrill whistle, and the next thing I was conscious of was the grasp of a fresh pair of arms from behind. After that I gave it up, more especially as we had rolled to the edge of the roof, and a renewal of the struggle would send us over into the yard, with broken limbs and bloody pates.

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"If some one will take his foot out of my stomach," I said, "I will descend into the yard."

At that the tension upon me was relaxed, and I was pushed forward roughly to what appeared to be a trap-door in the roof, down which I climbed, thrust brusquely from above. Here I found myself in a small loft above the stalls of the stable. My captors followed, and one of them struck a match, when the light fell upon Hood's face. From that familiar and sinister countenance my eyes glanced about me to several figures in the half-light. I saw at once what had been my undoing; for this loft was used as a dormitory for the Greeks, and the noise of my passage along the roof had evidently alarmed them. At a gesture from Hood two of these brutes seized my arms, and I was forced to descend the ladder to the ground. I protested against this treatment, saying that I had given my word not to attempt to escape; and I suppose some sign passed from Hood, for the men suffered me to proceed unmolested, keeping, however, upon either side of me. We entered the inn by the back way, and I expected nothing now but to be thrust into some dismal cellar—there to rot and fester until such time as my jailers were pleased to deliver me. To my surprise, however, I was taken into an inner parlor of the inn, where I was left to myself, the Greeks turning the key in the door as they retired. No word had been uttered upon their side throughout the scene. They moved like automata at the beck of the innkeeper. A lamp was burning on the table, which was covered with a green baize table-cloth, and the little window looked upon the road, where the sign of The Woodman, with his up-lifted axe, was swinging gently.

Immediately afterwards Sercombe entered, with Hood upon his heels.

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"I regret, Mr. Greatorrex," said the adventurer, "that you should have so small a notion of us as to try this game."

"It very nearly came off," I answered.

"I grant you it was very ingenious. Mr. Hood and I have just been making some investigations, and I congratulate you on your fertility of idea. But your cleverness is only partial. You have never throughout the whole affair been thorough, Mr. Greatorrex, for which naturally you pay the penalty." He spoke very jauntily and plucked his mustache quite gayly; while it sickened me to see the blackguard there in this new rôle, who, but forty-eight hours before, had pledged me his word to carry out another arrangement. But if he could betray his friends, I had certainly no ground of complaint that he should also betray me. I don't suppose it cost him a moment's scruple. Indeed, looking at him there, I brought myself for the first time almost to prefer Hood to him. Hood, at least, was a frank enemy, diabolic though he might be.

"I am going to ask you, Mr. Greatorrex," went on Sercombe, "to pass your word to make no effort to escape to-night."

"I see no reason why not," I said, somewhat bitterly. "If I do not, I certainly think better of you than to suppose you will let me break out again. And if I do, it only means that some one gets more sleep."

"Precisely," said he. "But it might also mean the cellars, Mr. Greatorrex."

I shrugged my shoulders. "It is a hot night. But I pass my word. Take it, in God's name, and have done with it."

"That is right," he answered, cheerfully; "you will find an excellent sofa here, though it is soft in the

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springs. And I will take it on myself to order a good stout grog for you, if you will so honor me. Moreover, I understand that there is literature of a sort here. Am I right, Hood?"

"Yes, sir," said Hood, speaking for the first time. "Some *Leisure Hours*, sir, and *The Sunday-School Magazine*, sir, I think."

"Ah," said Sercombe, dryly. "Well, I dare say Mr. Greatorex hasn't read them."

And the whiskey being fetched, the two retired, leaving me to the night and my own angry thoughts.

I was punctually called and punctually served the next morning by Hood himself, who, whatever his faults, was a capital servant. He said nothing beyond making the customary inquiries of a landlord; and if I had been in any other mood than that of desperate chagrin the irony of that "Tea or coffee, sir?" would have tickled my sense of the ludicrous. But I was not disposed to talk, and so I was equally silent with him. Nor was my quietude broken until some two hours later, when Sercombe entered.

"Look here, Mr. Greatorex," said he, quickly, "if we're not careful this little enterprise of ours will be taken clean out of our hands. Now I don't contemplate an interference with the game with equanimity; and, if I know you, you want to play your tricks yourself."

"I thought," I observed, "that the game was over," wondering all the time what he was meaning.

"Yes, and no," said he. "But there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, and you don't know what has been happening while you've been here."

"In other words," I answered, "my friends may not have been caught as easily as myself, although you will note that I still have that key."

I fancied that he winced; but he went on, hastily,

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"That is so. And, besides, in any case, you are bound by your compact of silence."

"If you will tell me what you are driving at—" I began.

"See here, sir," he broke in, "there's been a damned deal of talk in the country-side, and, what with that mutton-faced fool Jones's suspicions, the authorities have begun to smell a rat."

"I am very sorry for you," said I, dryly. "I understood that he had not a high opinion of you."

"His opinion be hanged," he retorted; "but I won't have any interference—nor, I take it, will you."

"No; I prefer my prison, naturally," I declared.

"What I want to tell you is this," he resumed, paying no heed to my sarcasm. "It seems that Jones and the other meddler have got wind of your disappearance. The police have been scouring the Gwent; and what must the beast do but cast his suspicious eyes on me."

"Well?" I asked.

He dropped his voice. "They are outside now, and Hood is parleying with them. They've got that silly ass of a parson with them, who is by way of being my friend. He's taken to me mightily, because I had a brother or a cousin at Rugby. And nothing must serve them but that they must make investigations in the inn."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Upon my word, I don't see what I can do for you," I said.

"Yes, you do," he replied, sharply. "I have told the sergeant that you are here right enough, but are staying with me as my guest. He swears he must see you and find out for himself; and the parson, amiably embarrassed, vows I am being insulted. However, there you are."

"Very well," said I, slowly, "let them in."

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Sercombe scrutinized me keenly, as though he would read my soul, and then, apparently satisfied, left the room.

In another moment a knock sounded at the door, and Hood, flinging it open, said, "Gentlemen to see you, sir."

The little parson entered, followed by the sergeant who had called at the castle. I looked up from my books and rose instantly.

"How do you do, vicar?" I said, offering him a hand. "Good-day, sergeant."

The policeman was taken aback, and stared at me sheepishly; but the parson turned to him triumphantly.

"I told you so, Jones," he declared. "I am not in the habit of doubting Captain Sercombe's word."

"Gentlemen," I said, feigning astonishment, "may I ask, what is this?"

"Oh, it's an absurd piece of business from the start," said the vicar, emphatically. "What is coming over the police I don't know. No man of position is safe from them."

"You would think if he had a cousin at Rugby it would be sufficient," interrupted the suave voice of Sercombe.

The vicar turned. "Precisely, captain," he said, eagerly; "I think I did my best to explode the foolish notion."

"May I ask, gentlemen—" I began, but Sercombe interrupted.

"There was a notion that you were being detained by force," he said, smiling.

I laughed. "By force. Is every man who spends a couple of days with a friend to become a case of abduction?"

"Very well put, sir," approved the Rev. Mr. Mor-

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gan. "I was never at Rugby myself, but I had an uncle who—"

"Excuse me, sir," said Jones, obstinately; "do your friends know where you are?"

"Did they inform you of my disappearance?" I asked.

Jones hesitated. "No, sir," he said, at last.

"I should think not," I replied.

A murmur of approbation came from the vicar. Jones looked abashed, but he had the proper Welsh obstinacy, and still lingered. The vicar turned on him.

"Come, Jones," he said, "I think apologies are due from you to both these gentlemen, and I trust you see how preposterous your theories are."

"I beg your pardon, sir, for intruding," said Jones, to me, but he did not look at Sercombe, and he made him no apology. He retired clumsily, and Sercombe burst out laughing, and, throwing his hat on the table, sat down. "Take a seat, Mr. Morgan," he said. "Let us all have a glass of wine after this trying ordeal. Greatorex, you'll join us?"

I declined, but the parson accepted and sat down to an amiable gossip. Branching from his uncle, who had been—I forget where; in some school, I fancy—he lingered affectionately on a friend who had been heir presumptive to a baronetcy; and was, undoubtedly, bent upon a further revelation of his connections with the aristocracy, when Sercombe, by cunning devices, lured his tongue to another topic, in which both of us were interested. It appeared that there was a great curiosity spreading as to the castle and the events of the past weeks. Some went so far as to speak knowingly of a "mystery," but, as the little vicar said, "The lower classes are fond of talking about their superiors, and imputing to them abominable crimes." He sipped his wine, and con-

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fided in us, getting back at last, through all Sercombe's nets, to his respectable connections. He was a descendant of Ap-Morgan, it seemed, which was undoubtedly interesting, but might have been more interesting if we had known who Ap-Morgan was. Finally he concluded in a pleasant mixture of snobbery and religion, and prepared to take his leave. I got up simultaneously.

"I will accompany you, Mr. Morgan," I said; "I will walk as far as the castle, if that is your way."

Sercombe started, and then a broad grin grew on his face.

"I congratulate you on your quickness of wit," he whispered, as I passed him.

It was a tiny triumph, but I enjoyed it all the more because I had been for so long a mere tool in their hands. I took the parson's arm and walked out into the roadway. Sercombe and Hood stood in conference before the door when I looked back, and I thought I perceived in the distance a grim and shallow smile flash over the latter's face.

CHAPTER XVII

WE TURN HIGHWAYMEN

I PARTED from the vicar at the gates of the castle, and hurried through the park in a lively state of anxiety. I had not yet conceived for myself what had happened in the interval of my absence. Sercombe, to be sure, had thrown out hints, but I knew better than to put any faith in him. Still, it was certain that anything might have happened, and we might even now be in possession of the treasure. But what gave me my first blow was the sight of the draw-bridge peacefully spanning the waters of the moat, and the spikes of the portcullis protruding just below the archway. These appearances seemed to point in one direction, and to acquaint me that the game was up.

Inside I met Mrs. Main, who started in alarm, and pursued me with her excited inquiries—so that it was very plain whence the news of my disappearance had reached the police. She informed me that Mr. Sheppard and Mr. Montgomery were both within, and seated, in fact, at lunch. In the dining-room, therefore, I sought them, and broke in upon them. I will not say with what delight I was welcomed, embraced affectionately by Sheppard, and sturdily shaken by Montgomery's great fist. They had been anxious, and yet not alarmed, by my absence. Sheppard's wits were always quick, and said he :

"I knew that it was not worth their while to slaugh-

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ter you, Ned, but what other devilment they might be up to I could not guess. On the whole, we decided finally in favor of what actually occurred." And then, "So you were taken?" he asked. "But how?"

"Give me food and wine, and I will give you my story," I replied, sitting down to the table.

Sheppard laid his hand on my shoulder. "No," said he; "not yet. There is something further first," and, looking at him, I perceived a great gravity on his features; he showed a worn and troubled face, now that the excitement of my return was over.

"What is the matter?" I asked. "Is the treasure—"

"That is it," he said. "I want that key. We tried the door in vain. We could not break it down. It is adamant. God knows it was not for want of trying."

"I fear the key is no use to us now," I said, quickly.

He regarded me seriously, and with a pale face.

"You must forget, Ned," he said, gently, "what you left there."

Montgomery's face had fallen, and he sat echoing Sheppard's consternation. Suddenly a light dawned on me. It was Hood they had in mind. Not once in the course of my reflections these three days had this idea struck me. And now, although I did not envy them their gruesome fears and that ghastly nightmare, the discrepancy between the starved and dwindling body of the prisoner, as they pictured it, and that live and actual scoundrel afoot with his devilish tricks, appealed to me with a sense of the ludicrous, and I could not forbear laughter.

"Hood's not there," I said. Sheppard stared at me.

"Not a bit of it," I went on. "He's plump and live as ever, and a worse rascal."

"But how—but why?" exclaimed Montgomery. "I thought the poor devil was dead and rotten by now. We tried all we could—"

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"Oh, I see I must fasten on to my story without more ado," I said; and accordingly began at once upon my narrative. Chagrin grew upon their faces as I proceeded, and I was interrupted only by the expressions of astonishment and anger which the various episodes of my adventure evoked from both. When it was over, Sheppard rose.

"With your leave, Ned," said he, "I will go down to the keep forthwith," and he left the room, with Montgomery at his heels. I, too, followed, for I was eager to know the worst without unnecessary delay.

My surmises were quite correct. The dungeon rested as it had done when I saw it last, and apparently had suffered no trespass. The chests stood in the corner as before, but they were bare of every piece of gold, amulet, or jewel. The thieves had made a clean job of their depredation. We stared at one another in dismay, and retreated dismally to the upper regions of the house.

"Well, there's an end," said Montgomery, with a sigh; and I fancy we were all of the same opinion in that early blast of despair.

The treasure was gone, and he must be a sharp fellow, indeed, who could discover its hiding-place throughout the district of the Gwent, or maybe within the borders of the kingdom. Our multifarious counsels, our strenuous efforts, the time and trouble and blood, spent upon this enterprise, had all been for nothing. Better had the secret of the castle remained immured within its cruel walls, and we ourselves been given over to the placid enjoyment of a summer holiday. Sheppard was the first to show us the way out of our deadly apathy.

"I am not going to see it stop here, Ned," he said, with determination, "and that's the truth. That treasure must be somewhere, and we've got to find it."

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It was not so much that there was reason in his words as that their spirit sharpened us both to more virile thoughts. There was no avenue to our goal, so far as I could see, and yet it did me good to hear him.

"I say 'ditto' to that," cried Montgomery, stalwartly, heaving a sigh of resolution.

"If we could narrow the field," I said.

"Pshaw!" said Sheppard. "They can't have got it far. How many days is it? Why, they can't have got the money out all at one shot; otherwise they would not have kept you locked up. I'll go bail that the last was fetched out only last night, if as early as that. And if so, the treasure is not very far from the castle."

"Some of it may be in London," I answered, moodily.

"Well, mind you, I don't admit it. But say it is so; there must be something still about the Gwent, and we've got to run it down. I think, from what you say, you surprised them by your flitting with the vicar. It is evident that they wished to keep you a little longer, no doubt until they had disposed of the treasure under our noses. And to think that we were melting with pity for that damned cutthroat, Hood!"

"You are right, I believe," I replied. "Why did they want to keep me? Not because they had not the treasure, but to prevent an alarm. And yet the motive was not strong enough that they dared risk a misunderstanding with Morgan. Yes, you've hit it, Sheppard. But the Gwent is wide enough, Heaven knows."

"Come, we have reached one point," said Sheppard. "Perhaps we can do more on reflection. Don't let us give it up. Is this treasure likely to be anywhere about the inn?"

"There is the barn," said I, "and the stable-lofts, and there are the cellars."



"THE TREASURE WAS GONE"

WE TURN HIGHWAYMEN

"Oh, Ned, there is everywhere," groaned Sheppard.

"We might watch, if they haven't got it away," suggested Montgomery, with some hesitation. It was not often that he intervened in our counsels, but his intervention was now to the point.

"Good!" said Sheppard, smacking him on the shoulder.

"Watch is the word. We've hitherto kept our watches in the battlements; we must now merely transfer them to where the treasure has gone."

"Where is that?" I asked.

"Let us say The Woodman," replied Sheppard, smiling.

"A very much more dangerous duty," I said, slowly.

"Dangerous! We thrive on danger," said Sheppard, gayly. "Anyhow, let us break up the conference and take an airing. There's nothing to keep us now in the castle; and hence we are in no need of drawbridges. It is we who are the assailants."

"That reminds me," I put in—"I found the drawbridge down when I came in just now."

Sheppard winked. "My dear boy, if you'd had to answer all the awkward questions I have had to during the last three days, you would have let down the drawbridge in despair."

"Jones?" I queried.

"Jones it is, the majesty of the law; and an infernally suspicious law it is. We have been trusting to luck and daylight and the police while the sun was up, and drawing the bridge at night; and now let us walk."

It was yet early in the afternoon, and there might be time to put a point upon our resolutions. This thought ran in our heads, as, all three, we turned down the road that led to The Woodman.

Sercombe was sunning himself before the door of

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the inn, seated in a comfortable chair beneath the swinging sign. As we came abreast of him he looked up and greeted us.

"Good-day, gentlemen," he said, cheerfully. "I'm glad to see you back, Mr. Greatorrex. We heard that you had disappeared, and were beginning to be anxious about you."

The amazing impudence of the man took away my breath, but I managed to recover and say,

"Yes ; I have been taking a little holiday. Private business, you know, captain."

"Ah !" said he, shaking his head. "I wish I had the time ; but I find holidays must look after themselves. I've too much on hand."

"I sympathize with you, Captain Sercombe," said Sheppard. "For myself I never could abide business. But I think I understand to what you refer—a bad business—a very bad business."

Sercombe studied him attentively. "You seem to know a great deal, my dear sir," he replied.

"I know, and you know that I know, that you have the heaviest team to drive up-hill that ever man undertook," said Sheppard, watching him.

"Maybe," said the captain, after a pause. "Life's not all beer and skittles, gentlemen. Perhaps you're right. I don't say you're wrong. But the fact is that I—well, it's a pity we couldn't have fixed an arrangement together earlier."

"I think I have the pleasure of recalling a bargain struck between us, Captain Sercombe," said I, dryly.

"Oh, as for that," he answered, with a frank laugh, "I will admit the soft impeachment. But I have come to the conclusion that you cannot upset the coach when the horses have started. No, sir ; we should have started on a different tack—that's my point."

He spoke so freely that I inferred he was not any

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longer in the fear of Hood, which meant for us that Hood was absent.

Was he absent, looking after the treasure? Upon consideration I decided that this was unlikely; otherwise Sercombe would not be resting so comfortably in his chair. The two scoundrels dared not trust one another. In that case the odds were that the treasure lay in The Woodman; and here was Sercombe, and as likely as not a Greek or two, keeping guard upon it. This was all I wanted to know, and, having gained this information, I deemed it time to retire. You will think me rash in my conjectures, but you must conceive that in the game we were playing it was necessary to come to a conclusion quickly, and I had learned to come to a conclusion on the slightest evidence. Anyhow, I gave the signal for retreat, and back we went to the castle by a circuitous route, so as to avoid any suspicions on the part of the captain.

Night was the occasion I wanted, and it was for the fall of dark that we waited with great impatience. Sheppard agreed with me that the treasure lay in the inn, and most probably in the cellars. The two thieves would secure it against one other. I admit that I entertained little hope of cutting out the treasure under the noses of the enemy. On the other hand, it would be difficult to say what I really did anticipate or aim at in this nocturnal expedition. I think we all felt that we could not compose our minds to rest and an imperturbable indifference. We must be upon our legs and bustling about some business, even though it should prove the veriest moonshine; and I believe, too, that a notion was current among us that we might by some felicitous chance, or by some heroic effort, accomplish something under the cover of darkness, if we might not actually wrest from its abominable holders the gold and jewels of the treasure.

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At ten o'clock we three were gathered within the shelter of the deep thicket before The Woodman. Montgomery had taken up his position there by light, but reported that there had been no movement in the inn. The thicket, which was closely grown with underwood, and opened in a little yawning grassy dell immediately before the sign of the inn, upon the farther side sloped by great steeps into the valley. Here, a mile or less below the castle, the woods were still hanging above the sharp descent, as though in reluctance to go down. But presently, and a little deeper from the inn, the Gwent rolled over suddenly and swept in a fall upon the bottom below. Hence on the night rose the sound of a small cataract, leaping down the face of the rocky hill into the interior blackness of the forest.

Within this coign of vantage we rested, peeping through the interstices of the foliage upon The Woodman. The windows gleamed with light, but beyond that there was no mark of life. Half an hour went by in this way, and then a sound of voices rose from the inn, and presently there emerged from the doorway two men, who stood in conversation for a few minutes before the house. It was too dark to make them out distinctly, but one I set down as Hood. After a time they separated, Hood, as I supposed him to be, returning into the inn, and his companion walking down the road away from us. If we were to effect anything this man must be followed; and I whispered as much to the others, determining to take the duty on myself. Slipping through the copse, therefore, I struck downward through the fringe of wood that bordered the road. My progress was naturally slower than that of the man I was tracking, and soon I was surprised to lose the sound of his feet. But a moment's reflection convinced me that he had turned off

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the roadway and was proceeding, like myself, through the forest. This conviction became certainty a little later, when, pausing to resolve upon my direction, I heard the noise of breaking sticks ahead of me, and a brushing among the foliage. Guided by these sounds, I shifted my path and went forward. I imagine now that the man must have heard me, just as I had news of him in the wood, and that he knew he was being followed. At the time I thought myself undiscovered, for I moved with slight noise. Yet what happened was this: I suddenly ceased once more to get tidings of him. I paused and waited, but the valley (for we were now winding into the bottom) was stagnant with silence, save for the purling stream in the distance. Slowly and cautiously I pushed on, and came out into a more open space, where I stood silent, waiting again. I must have remained there, still and attentive to all the tiny ruptures of the nocturnal quietude, for more than half an hour. But I heard nothing of my man, and so in some disgust I resolved to abandon the pursuit. Retracing my steps I climbed up to the road, and rejoined my companions in the thicket. I found Sheppard in what for him was a bad temper.

"Our sport is being spoiled," he said, impatiently; and to my questions added, "Jones."

"What is he about?" I asked.

"Apparently on the same errand as ourselves," he observed.

I considered. "We'd better go back," I said. "The less Jones sees of us the better; and, besides, he'll do our work for us."

I think we all welcomed the suggestion, for we were all mightily weary of the game, but we retreated to the castle in some chagrin. Sheppard pulled at his pipe for some time in silence.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he queried after a time.

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I shook my head. "I felt better this afternoon."

"So did I," he returned.

"You're not going to give up?" asked Montgomery.

We both laughed. "Not yet," I said. "There's plenty of time for despair."

"Well, we'll consider the position to-morrow," said Sheppard, yawning; with which we got to bed, and I for one slept like the graveyard dead.

I rode into Raymond next morning with Montgomery, taking the road upon the south side of the valley, away from The Woodman, upon which Sheppard promised to keep his eyes. I was anxious to discover what progress Jones had made in his investigations, and, moreover, I felt slightly uneasy as to our own posture in the affair. Had the law got wind of us? And were we connected in Jones's mind with the mysterious transactions of the Gwent?

As luck had it, we did not find Jones, who had returned to Raymond very early in the morning, but had been hastily summoned back into the Gwent after breakfast. He had, my informant imagined, crossed us, but I accounted for not meeting him by the new route we had taken. Therefore, none the wiser for our excursion, we turned the horses homeward, and, climbing the rise beyond the river, clattered down into the forest. We had ridden half-way to Llanellan when Montgomery's mare fell lame, and he dismounted to examine her shoe. As he was engaged for some time in the occupation, I pulled my nag into the shade of the big trees by the way, and waited for him. Throwing myself off, I put my arm through the bridle and walked over to the margin of the wood, where the grass grew in abundance, now fading a drab yellow under the magnificence of the autumn sun. The road here took a sharp bend, and in the act

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an abrupt peninsula or headland of coppice stood out from the main continent of forest. As my horse nibbled at the grass, I heard a noise of wheels in the distance, and glanced through the tangle along the highway. Down from Llanellan a trap was being driven furiously towards us. The rate at which it rolled was prodigious, and clouds of dust flew up and enveloped horse, vehicle, and driver in their course. Thinking that this must be a runaway, I slipped the bridle over the horse's neck, and, calling to Montgomery, leaped into the saddle and turned the corner to meet it. As I did so the carriage, which was of a rude, serviceable type common in the country, was plainly visible to me, and I to its occupant. What astounded me was to see him raising his whip through the smoke of dust, in act to strike fiercely at the flanks of the animal; and the next second he stopped, dropped the whip and, as it seemed to me, reined in his horse. At all events the pace was now much slower—in fact, but a comfortable amble. While I was wondering on this curious manœuvre the trap drew near enough for me to notice the driver, and, to my astonishment, I saw that it was Hood.

His face was all asweat and grimed with dust, and plainly he had been squeezing the last ounce out of his beast, as the saying is. Why, then, did he pull up on seeing me? A flow of thoughts rushed through my brain, but it was not until he came wellnigh abreast of me that the inspiration seized me. He made as if to pass, civilly touching his hat; but by a sudden movement I wheeled my horse across the road and barred his way. Had he been going at his previous rate, I confess that I should have thought twice ere I took this hazard; but, as it was, there was no harm done. Hood himself, taken by surprise, pulled back and jerked his left rein, sending the beast tow-

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ards the ditch. I cried to Montgomery, and, leaning over, caught at the reins.

"It's all up, Hood," I said. "You're a done man this time."

"Beg your pardon, sir," said he, staring at me. "But I was going to Raymond."

"Yes, and I dare say you were," said I. "But now you're going to the castle."

At that moment Montgomery came up, leading his mare, and took in the situation. Running round, he held the other rein. Hood looked from one to the other.

"This is highway robbery, gentlemen," he said.

"Call it what you will," I replied, with nonchalance. "Montgomery, I'll trouble you to peep into that carriage." At the words, Hood's eyes shot with a malignant light, and his nostrils curled and shivered like those of a vicious horse. The next second he sprang from his seat across the horse's back and leaped at my throat with his open knife. My horse plunged, and took the blow upon his shoulder, which was ripped open in a red gash. Then, without a sound, Montgomery pinned the ruffian to the earth. It was not the first time that he had felt the grip of those great arms, and he lay still, underfoot in the dust.

We had been so engrossed with the incident that we had not noticed the sound of an approaching horseman, and now his voice broke in upon us, startling us.

"Thank you kindly, gentlemen. I am obliged to you," it said, and there was Sercombe, very red and very dusty, but with a twinkling smile struggling over a grave and anxious face. Hood got to his feet at once.

"The rascal gave me the slip," said Sercombe, "but I am much in your debt for stopping him."

"Ah!" said I. "That's the story, is it?"



“ ‘VERY SORRY,’ SAID SERCOMBE, POINTING HIS REVOLVER ”

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It is extremely odd, and I recall the fact now with some sense of discomfiture ; but this sudden appearance of Sercombe, and the evidence that he had been chasing Hood, completely put my reckoning out. The events had turned things topsy-turvy for the time ; nor did I realize at once that we were still antagonists, opposed upon the possession of the very treasure which, I had conceived, was concealed in the carriage. But if I was late in coming to my wits, not so Hood. He might quarrel with Sercombe privately, but as against us he was the captain's partner ; and, sidling up to him, he whispered a few words. Sercombe nodded, and ere I had time to observe all this properly he had edged his horse between the carriage and myself and pulled forth a revolver.

"Very sorry, Mr. Greatorex," said he, pointing it at me. "It seems an ungrateful return, but upon my soul I can't help it. I'd a deuced sight sooner offer the barrel elsewhere ; but there it is—we are such damnable creatures of fortune."

He grinned pleasantly, and Hood whipped into his seat and turned the carriage about. As for Montgomery and myself, we were entirely taken aback. They had the advantage of us, and we should have been fools to refuse to recognize it. So, after the first stare of consternation, I made the best of it.

"Delighted to be of service to Captain Sercombe any time," I said. "And now, as I presume we are all going the same way, we shall have the pleasure of your company."

"That's right," he observed. "Hood, drive ahead, not too fast this time," and the inn-keeper, who had now resumed his placid air, obeyed him. We jogged along together, conversing quite affably, but the captain kept an eye upon us, riding a little to one side, and holding a hand ostentatiously in his pocket.

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In this manner we rode through Llanellan, and drew near to The Woodman. Sercombe turned to me a little way off.

"I reckon," he said, "that you'll want to know where those chests are?"

"I reckon I have a chance now," said I.

"Faith! and you're right," he remarked, gnawing his mustache in some perplexity. Hood never swerved in his course (and I tell you I kept a sharp watch on him). He drove up to the door of the inn and, throwing the reins on the horse's back, jumped down. And now the adventure began to promise greater interest even than before. I racked my brains to guess what way they would try for an exit to this blind alley. But in the midst of my speculations I perceived suddenly that there was a crowd of people before the door of The Woodman, and immediately upon our arrival we were hailed with excited shouts and cries. I jumped off, and the others followed suit. As I did so I perceived Jones, the police-sergeant, elbowing his way towards me through the throng.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Is that Captain Sercombe who came with you?" he asked.

"Yes, yes; but what is it?" I repeated, impatiently, for the ominous faces about me alarmed me with strange fears. Jones made a motion to go, and then turned to me.

"David Williams," he said, formally, "a man employed by you, Mr. Greator, was found at eight o'clock this morning stabbed to death in the lower Gwent."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COUNTRY-SIDE BEGINS TO HUM

THE sergeant turned on his heel as he concluded his sentence and strode off towards the door of the inn. A ghastly sensation of physical fear, as though I had been detected in the act of assassination, overwhelmed me, and left me staring with my jaw down. Then I ran after Jones, calling upon him, and elbowing my way through the crowd. Sercombe stood for a moment, conspicuous in the doorway, and then he vanished. But Jones, being a small man, was swallowed up among the villagers. I caught sight of Montgomery, standing apart by his horse, and hulloaed to him. He hesitated for an instant, and then pushed through to me.

"Find Jones," I said, hurriedly; "Williams is dead—murdered by this bloody gang. Oh! there he is—" and we reached him simultaneously.

I pressed my questions home, and Jones, beckoning to one of his men, who stood by, lent half an ear to me.

"Excuse me, sir," said he, "I will attend to you directly," and whispered some order in the officer's ear. The man made his way through the throng and disappeared. "Yes, sir," said Jones. "A little way from the stream we found the body—first discovered by a man, Lewis, going to work. Evidently attacked by more than one person; but the coroner will determine that."

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"See here, Jones," said I, "can I see you later?"

He looked at me with his sharp, uncompromising eyes. "Yes, sir; I dare say we'll want your evidence."

"All right," I answered; and, turning to Montgomery, "Come, we'd better get back. There's nothing to be got from him at present."

Montgomery pulled my arm. "Hood!" he whispered.

I started. The idea flashed upon me in a distasteful light. "To be sure," I said; "I had forgotten." We hurried out of the knot of stragglers. The carriage and Hood were gone!

This discovery brought my wandering senses together. We had been duped again, and that by a sheer accident, of which Hood had cunningly taken advantage. I myself had prepared my own disappointment. Montgomery informed me apologetically that he had tried to keep his eye on the carriage, but that my summons had taken him from his post. I commended the dogged loyalty of the lad, and cursed my folly. I cursed it the more as I had now a double reason for desiring to lay my hands on Hood. At that moment I would have willingly shot the brute with my revolver. We inquired eagerly among the bystanders, but that was of little avail. One or two had seen the carriage drive off, and these all agreed it had taken the road to the castle. The futility of these inquiries soon dawned on me. It was not so that Hood should be taken; and I went back to Jones with my news.

"If you want the real murderer," I declared, "you will find him on the top of a carriage driving somewhere between here and Aberavon."

The sergeant stared at me.

"Hood," said I.

Jones smiled. "What evidence have you, sir?" he asked, pulling out his note-book.

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I stammered and hesitated. "He's a damned scoundrel!" said I.

Jones looked extremely dispassionate, but seemed prepared to copy down my sentiments. All of a sudden I saw the situation in its ridiculous light; but, though it stopped my tongue, it did not dispose me to laughter.

"If you have any evidence to offer against Mr. Hood, sir, I shall be pleased to take it down," said Jones, and at the same moment he elevated his eyebrows in a formal smile at some one behind me. I started round, and there was Hood, immobile and civil, as always.

I said never a word.

"I shall be pleased to answer any questions, sir," said Hood.

I cursed him in my heart for an amazing scoundrel, and turned on my heel. It did not please me to suffer so black an eclipse. Montgomery followed meekly at my heels.

"I would have knocked the beast down if you had given the word," he said.

His lealty won my heart. "Montgomery," said I, "if there's any good soul in this world, which I have begun to doubt, it's you. And now the devil of it is that we have Williams in our gizzard; and the clearer it appears the blacker it looks." After which I think we spoke no more till we reached the castle.

Sheppard took our news gravely, and seemed to turn things over in his mind. "This is bad, Ned; very bad," he said, at length. "The place will be too hot to hold us."

"They don't identify us with the murder," said Montgomery.

"No," replied Sheppard, deliberately; "but it pulls the police web closer over us. We're marked men, in

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a way. We shall have a difficulty. This business is getting too complex. The fact is, we ought to have settled it by a bold stroke much earlier."

"We didn't know," said Montgomery.

I said nothing then at once, but presently I spoke up.

"Sheppard," I said, "and you, Montgomery, I think this thing has gone far enough. To tell you the truth, I have had enough of it for some time past. That man in the moat sickened me. We have let enough blood. I'm no girl at a boarding-school, but I'm not seventeenth-century enough for this job, and that's the English of it. Look at it in this way. We have been actuated by a mere greed of gold. There's no denying that. I will confess that I undertook it lightly. I had no notion that we were to be called upon to enter a bloody warfare. I'm equal to a game with risks upon both sides, but this massacre turns my stomach. What has Williams done? He stood no chance with us; he was not to share in our throw of the dice. It's plain, damnable murder, and an ugly sound it has. Can you tell me why he came by his death? I can. That man I tracked through the wood last night—he got wind of me. What his mission was I have no guess; but Williams was taken for an emissary, and dead men tell no tales. What he saw before he received his death-blow I won't hazard. But, mind you, he was knifed to death—hacked in the quick flesh till the life oozed out at the bloody gaps. That's black; that's bloody—and, by God! that's good enough, or bad enough, for me."

I spoke with heat, even with a passionate emotion; for the thoughts had been burning in my mind for some time. Sheppard said nothing for a space, but leaned forward and carefully knocked the ash from his cigar.

"What you say is very true, Ned," he said, quietly,

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at last, "and you have put it very bluntly ; and I don't say that you have not something on your side. You have emotion, at any rate, and we shall all be agreed that good, honest emotion is to be reckoned a force as much as reason. But, to my mind, you forget, you overlook too much, and your feelings miscarry. What, precisely, have we done? We have defended against a pack of ruffians what certainly is not their property, and what, so far as it is any one's, is ours, or rather yours. We have drawn blood in the encounters, but it was that same cutthroat blood. I will confess to you both that I am of a squeamish temper myself, and that first surprise fairly wrought upon me. But I pulled myself up and considered. It's true, Ned, as you say, that we are not seventeenth-century ; if we were, I should never have spared a compunction for that black scoundrel in the moat. But we are very adaptive ; at least, I am ; and I believe I have undergone a development—retrogression, if you will. Out of Sheppard evolves some primitive forefather. They say one scratches up the barbarian. Here, then, is Barbarian Sheppard, who is not to be put back by the smell of blood. As for this last affair—there's no denying its gravity. It has the menace of a tragedy—that's a fact. But where do we intervene? Williams meets a fate destined for one of us. We take our chances, but Providence designs otherwise. If we are to bewail the innumerable accidents of life, and to take upon ourselves responsibilities for all in which we have ever so small a share, why, we had better give up the game of life at once. I am part of the wheel that goes round—something upon the outer rim, and as little able to determine its movements as any other constituent. No ; Williams is dead ; I learn that with regret. I understood him for a man of spirit and pluck. Rest his soul. But by whom was he killed?

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By these very cutthroats against whom we are conspiring. There's another reason, and, if you like, a more potent reason, why we should continue. Williams's dead body does not stand between us and the treasure; and especially if we aim at two ends. Justice will be measured out by our pursuit. You will think I speak harshly, but I am talking sense. That is how it appears to me." Sheppard, finishing this long speech, looked at me with his restless and inquisitive eyes.

"You are wrong," I said. "It is not emotionally that I speak. On the contrary, I am guided by reason, and I take leave to say it is yours that is the sentiment. You are persuaded by excitement; you experience intoxication. To use your own phrase, you have gone back to your forefathers, while I am merely thinking of the end. We have shed blood; that is bad. We have been the cause of bloodshed; and that in a way is worse—at least, it seems so to me. I am not taking upon me the obligations of that murder. I feel no blood-guiltiness; yet facts cry out upon your indifference. The plain truth is that had we not been involved in this feud the man would have been alive this day. Well, but then I am looking ahead. What do you see there? I say that I can see nothing, for I do not pretend to be a prophet; but my eyes are sharp enough to recognize a black horizon. I tell you that it is shot with blood. The conflict is getting brutal; man's primitive passions are emerging, as you yourself admit. If we go on, it will be with increasing ferocity. We shall set passions in motion like a machine, the force of which is irresistible, the end of which is disaster. I ask you to consider that."

Sheppard turned softly to Montgomery. "What do you say?" he asked.

"I agree with what Greatorrex says," he answered,

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sturdily. "Let us go on and finish the brutes. They've done for Williams, poor chap; it's time we did for them."

Sheppard burst into gentle laughter, and I, too, could not forbear smiling at the boy's confusion of mind.

"There, you see, Ned," said Sheppard, slyly, "your eloquence has convinced Montgomery, and I must reluctantly give way. I am all for peace; but," he sighed, "we must needs be governed by the majority in these democratic times."

"I take your hint," I said, quietly. "But I am entitled to ask if you have duly considered?"

"I have, Ned," said he, gravely. "And you, Montgomery?"

"I am anxious to go, and ready to face the results," replied the lad.

"So be it," said I, and thereafter I never reverted to the subject. Looking back, with the memory of those stirring days strong upon me, I have sometimes blamed myself that I was led into acquiescence. But to comfort me there comes to me the thought that I was but one voice against two, that I did the best to convince them, and that, after all, the final issues of that unhappy struggle were hidden from me.

But having once made up my mind that we must go forward, I threw myself into the business with alacrity. Sercombe was gone; indeed, we learned that day that the police were searching for him. The treasure also had disappeared; and only Hood remained—silent, docile, civil, and, as I knew, implacable. He had deceived Jones so deeply that the poor fool imagined the innkeeper was his ally, and I dared not enlighten him for our private reasons. Moreover, I do not think that he would have paid me any attention. He thought he knew men, and as he had picked

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out Sercombe for suspicion, and even now, as I understood, held a warrant for his arrest, he had in the same obstinate blindness marked Hood for confidence.

Nay, more; it turned out that the ex-valet must have poisoned his mind against our party. What passed between them I have no means of guessing, nor what was the nature of the suspicion he attached to us. But I began to see at once that we were lying under a cloud. The news came to me in a most unpleasant form, with a visit of Mr. Landell, the squire of the neighborhood, and the justice whom we had already seen.

Ostensibly he came to question us upon Williams's movements, but his demeanor was such that it incriminated us, and ere he left he spoke frankly in his mild and pompous way.

"I will not conceal from you, Mr. Greator,ex," he said, severely, "that this is no light matter. The events circling about the castle have become current gossip; they have set the country-side aflame. No man has an inkling of the truth, but all suspect. I should do wrong not to inform you that you do not come honorably out of these events. There are black spots upon the specious narrative you have sworn to. I am not here as your judge, but I warn you that you run a risk by your silence. What is at the bottom of it all God knows. I am no detective, but I lay claim to common-sense, and I will ask you whether these stories of yours are worthy of credence. This house is the centre of disturbance. For generations the Gwent has been as peaceable as a garden, and of a sudden this breaks out, not once, nor twice, but through a continuous chain of mysteries. I hope I do you wrong, but I can conceive no answer to the problem save in the house itself."

"My dear sir," said I, forcing a note of sarcasm; for

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I liked the old man very well, "I can assure you, you would do well to trust to your detectives, of whom you say you are not one. I am obliged for your kindly offices, which I believe are well meant; but as I have a legal mind, you will excuse me if I cannot follow you in your attempt to confound the criminal with his victim. The castle is attacked by some scoundrels—apparently the castle is to blame. My man is murdered in the forest—forsooth, I am to blame. Upon my soul, sir, I begin to have some doubts as to your qualifications for your office."

The old gentleman had no skill in retort, and my sharp rejoinder, charged as it was with logic, confounded him. But though he made no defence, he withdrew nothing of his statement, and departed with much ceremony, leaving us, notwithstanding our brave faces, hot with shame and humiliation.

Sheppard pulled a mock face. "We look like ending in Execution Dock, Ned," he said. "I begin to follow your arguments."

"Oh, this is a trifle," I answered, impatiently, being yet under the sting of my abasement. "They have nothing against us, and I can't control the tongue of gossip, nor wouldn't try. As we have come to a conclusion, let us get to work."

"That's sound advice," echoed Montgomery, cordially. "Let us get on Sercombe's trail."

"We must beat the Gwent," said Sheppard, comically.

"Anyhow, let us do something," I cried in despair.

"Very well," returned Sheppard, slowly. "It is now within an hour of dinner. What do you say to a party of exploration after we have fortified our stomachs and are comfortable. Strong in the head, sound in the wind, and indomitable in spirit—I feel like making a night of it."

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"We have a bad precedent in our former expedition," I remarked, dryly.

"Oh, shut up, Ned," he said, ruefully. "Are we going on or not?"

"Yes, you are right," I answered to that protest. "I beg your pardon. We have decided to go on. An exploration party by all means." And so it was settled.

CHAPTER XIX

OUR NIGHT ADVENTURE IN THE GWENT

IVOR CASTLE, as I have explained more than once, was perched upon the heights that crown the western precincts of the Gwent. Beyond it, and still farther west, the forest descended into nether valleys that led towards a district of mines and furnaces. Sercombe and Hood might have secreted the treasure in any square yard of this broken tract of many miles. The chance of happening upon it, save by the guidance of some clew, was extremely slight ; nor did we know in which direction to look for a clew. From our eyrie on the saddle of the hill we looked out across the eastern valley. In any cranny of that rough and precipitous forest the gold and the jewels and Sercombe's Greeks might be at this moment stowed, in waiting for a safe conduct across the hills.

"Beat the Gwent" had been Sheppard's phrase, and that was very much what our expedition must come to. We descended the wooded slopes upon the northern face of the gorge, dropping slowly from the castle. Few roads traversed this region—one, in parts but an open track, running the length of the spur into the plain ; the others, merely tracks of grass, crossed and recrossed by foot-paths through the great wilderness. The Gwent was very sparsely settled, and the only tenants of these regions were a few wood-cutters, scattered among the huts throughout the forest. It was into this silence and desolation

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that we plunged in the early hours of the night. Darkness hung about us, convoying our steps with blacker shadows from the copses. At first progress was leisurely, and the walking (through a plantation of pine) fairly easy. We had designed to strike a road that ran over the spur southward, mainly out of a whim of Sheppard's that he could determine if any carriage had passed that way.

"These tracks are unfrequented," he explained, "not a pair of wheels once a week ; and I'll guarantee if Sercombe drove this way, which leads naturally to the station at Vreachan, he has left his marks. There was rain last night."

I had not so much hope myself, but his plan was the only one before us, and so we directed our steps towards this cross-road. Presently we fell lower, and became entangled in a wilder mass of verdure, and for a time struggled and wrestled with the bracken and the underwood. Down the valley came the cry of a cock-pheasant, and then, with a whizzing and whirring of wings a covey sailed out of the deeps, became a momentary buzz about our heads, and disappeared into the bracken beyond.

"We didn't startle those," said Montgomery.

"How do you know?" I asked, though the matter seemed indifferent.

"Oh, I know pheasants," said Montgomery, emphatically. "They've been scared down in the bottom there."

"You mean—" I began.

"Don't let's talk so loud," urged the boy ; "there's some one down there."

I shut my mouth, but for the first time that evening my spirits picked up. If it was true, then we were upon the trail !

The notion put new blood into us all. "No noise

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this time," said I, in warning, "and no discovery. Let us go ahead slowly."

It was impossible to proceed through that bracken without some sound; the fern lay so thick about our legs. But we moved with the utmost caution, silently making for the distant patch of forest whence the pheasants had started. No word was spoken between us, but we communicated by gestures, which were just visible in the faint starlight. Now Sheppard, who was in front, would hold up his hand, and for the space of some seconds we would catch our breath and pause and listen; and then again it was Montgomery or myself who gave the signal. Drawing close in this manner, we halted at length upon the margin of the spot over which our suspicions brooded. Sheppard crawled stealthily forward, and after a time we followed him. He caught my arm and pointed to the ground.

"Some one *has* passed here," he whispered. "We're on a side-track."

"So much the better," I answered in the same voice; "we shall make less noise in walking."

With that we resumed our way with the same microscopic caution, and must have covered, as I should guess, about the quarter of a mile, when suddenly Sheppard came to a pause.

"Hear anything?" he murmured in my ear.

I shook my head.

"I believe they're just ahead—several of them," he continued. "Step lightly, for Heaven's sake!"

I needed no reminder, nor did Montgomery. We were like a church service for solemnity; and crept rather than walked, as we stalked closer upon our prey. All of a sudden Montgomery, who was walking just before me, dropped on his knee and moved his hand back to me. I followed his example, and crawled on all-fours towards him.

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"What is it?" I asked.

"There's some one behind that tree," he whispered, pointing to a huge oak some ten feet from the path.

There ensued a deep silence, and then, just as I began to find my position intolerable, and was thinking of changing my feet, a twig cracked in the forest, and there came a noise as of feet among the dry leaves.

"What shall we do?" he asked.

To say the truth, I had no idea; but it was plain that if we had been seen, concealment was of no further use; and if we had not, that the spy could not now discover us through the undergrowth. So we resumed our path, rather speedily, and caught up with Sheppard. He came to meet us in a state of excitement, laying his arms upon our shoulders and drawing our heads together.

"Hood, as I live!" he cried, in a whisper.

"Did you see him?" we both spoke at once.

"Yes, he came from behind me, and crossed just in front. I had barely time to fall, and the light just took him in the eyes. We're safe now."

Our hearts were full of triumph, and we pushed on with no more talk. It was possible that he had not seen us, but I doubted that. If he had, he would throw his party forward with greater speed. We were now, however, upon his track, and we were satisfied; and each man loosened his pistol and girt himself for the eventual encounter. That Hood would show fight I had no doubt, and it was more than probable that he would endeavor to trick us. We must be on the watch for treachery. We wound along the track for the better part of an hour, now getting news of the enemy, and again leaving space for them to get away, when our neighborhood seemed in peril of discovery. We had agreed to postpone the

"THE LIGHT OF THE MOON FELL UPON JONES!"



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attack until the party reached its goal. If Hood had not seen us (and I was now disposed to believe that he had not), that goal would eventually be the hiding-place of the treasure. This was how we comforted ourselves, and upon this faith our spirits rose to a high pitch.

By this time we had lost count of our direction in the innumerable windings of the path, but apparently we were now mounting a hill, and I judged that it lay somewhere to the south of the castle, and towards the southern threshold of the Gwent. We were proceeding with our customary diligence and precautions, when quite of a sudden a noise of feet stamping on the earth assailed us, and round a corner came a posse of men and fell upon us. I drew back and lifted my revolver. Already Montgomery's rang out on my right—and then the light of the moon shooting through the trees, which in those parts were sparse, fell upon the face of Jones!

"Jones!" I said, in a voice in which dismay, fury, and disappointment blended.

The man in front of me dropped his hand.

"You, Mr. Greatorex?" he asked, sharply. "How do you come here?"

"God knows," I replied, angrily. "And what the devil are you doing—" I stopped suddenly, for the next face that came into my line of vision was the black, soft, impassive face of Hood.

"May I ask, sir, what brings you out to-night on this expedition?" asked Jones, pulling out his execrable pocket-book.

I was silent, but Sheppard broke in. "We have no objection, Mr. Jones, to give you our confidence, if you will be equally liberal with us. We were hunting for Captain Sercombe."

"Ah!" says Jones, making a note under the stars.

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"Then it is lucky I met you, gentlemen ; for I am doing the same."

I began to see.

"Mr. Hood," said Sheppard, with a polite gesture of his hand, "was guiding you?"

"Mr. Hood had an idea," responded Jones, sourly.

"Ah, Mr. Hood's ideas are very valuable," said Sheppard, quickly. "Pray treasure them."

"I think, Mr. Sergeant," I interrupted, being at length come to myself, "that we have been both badly deceived, and if I were you I should go home."

Jones hesitated. I think he had had enough of it. Wherever Sercombe was it was certain to me that he was very far from the place into which Hood had decoyed the police.

"I give you the same advice, sir," replied Jones. "And with your permission I will accompany you."

"I wish for no better escort than so zealous an officer," I answered, with some bitterness.

Jones spoke a word with Hood, and, that done, we retraced our steps through the forest in a mutual and embittered silence.

I think there was little conversation between us on our journey back. The sergeant used us very curtly, as if he would imply that we were defendants upon our trial. But one thing he did say, and that, as Sheppard remarked afterwards, without giving us the customary warning.

"I should like to ask you, Mr. Greatorex," he said, "what you want with Captain Sercombe?"

"I want a good deal," I answered, bluntly. "I want to warn him that he is wanted on a fatuous charge by a very obstinate and blind-eyed officer."

"I don't think he needs that warning, sir," said Jones, after a pause, and somewhat dryly.

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"Besides, you forget, Ned," put in Sheppard, "that he owes me twenty pounds."

"Ah!" said the sergeant, in a tone which implied that he was not to be startled by anything that Sercombe owed.

"And now," I asked, in my turn, "you will perhaps be good enough to tell me how you came to find us?"

"Mr. Hood heard you," he answered, civilly enough this time.

"It was good of Mr. Hood—very sharp of Mr. Hood," I returned. "And I take leave to thank Mr. Hood, and to wish that he had discovered us a little sooner. Maybe you and I would have been spared a useless tramp."

If we slept soundly that night it was owing more to the labors of the expedition than to any peace of mind or satisfaction of spirit. We were thoroughly out of tune with ourselves, and for the next two days our tempers came near to snapping. Even Montgomery looked sour and morose, but, to give him his due, he was all the more set on pursuing the adventure to an end. I took the liberty of inviting both of them to reveal their notions of the end. It would have been interesting to hear them, but a grim and sturdy silence was all my sally provoked. Meanwhile we heard nothing, and seemed no nearer to our clew. And it was in this manner that we spent the last day before the culmination of this strange and tragic history.

The first event in that continuous chain that drew us henceforward forthright to the dreadful close fell that evening, and when we were the least expecting so odd a turn to the affair. We had spent the night hunting Sercombe, and so, too, had Jones. We were now to find him. It was some time after six o'clock

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of a very black and ominous day that I spied him from the windows of my library crossing the draw-bridge and passing under the archway of the guard-room. At five Sheppard pointed out to me the face of a man looking from the bushes, and just upon that comes in Montgomery with the tidings that a police-officer was in waiting by the gates.

"What the deuce does he want?" I growled. "I'll let them know better than to trespass on my grounds."

"I thought I knew the face," said Sheppard. "Let's settle him. It means that we're watched."

We hurried out, but the picket was gone. Perhaps he had his orders, or it might be that he had already exceeded them.

Six o'clock, as I say, had struck, and it must have been twenty minutes later when Sercombe came up the drive. He walked with a slight limp, and like one in a mighty hurry, stumbling more than once in his passage over the cobbles, and delivering a volley of curses as he staggered or spun on his heels. I ran down the stairway to meet him, with the one thought in my head that he had escaped the police by a few minutes. I wanted to warn him of his danger. I have never to this day believed that Sercombe had any hand in Williams's death, nor that he was privy to it. In fact, I am quite certain that neither he nor Hood knew anything about the assassination, and that they were equally startled with ourselves, and perhaps quite as much put about. The Greeks alone were responsible.

As the man drew near me, I saw for the first time the change upon his face. The color, which was always high, had fallen sickly, and presented either a ghastly green or pallid redness to the eye. His great mustache was ragged, and blew in wisps about his mouth. His clothes, which he was wont to wear in excellent



HE WAS THOROUGHLY EXHAUSTED

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style and condition, were dusty, torn, and soiled. He had, to my astonished eye, the air of a drunken lunatic, and his stuttered oaths and his uncertain gait deepened the impression on me. He came up to the door and put out a hand as if groping for the bell, but, though I stood by, he did not seem to notice me.

"Sercombe!" I called, in amazement.

He passed his hand across his eyes. "Is that you, Mr. Greatorox? Excuse me, sir; I see badly. My eyes—get me in, for God's sake!" he concluded, almost in a whine.

I took his arm and assisted him into the nearest room, when he sank into a chair, breathing his exhaustion.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Greatorox," he said, presently, staring about him, "you're a good sort—if that's news. But what price would you put upon Hood now?" and he uttered a strange, hysterical laugh, concluding abruptly with an imprecation.

The man was plainly beyond himself with fatigue or pain, or both; and so I produced a glass and some brandy from the cupboard, and poured out a dose. He drank greedily, and sighed with relief. "That stuff does me good," he declared. "There's nothing like spirits, when all's said! I've tasted most drinks in my time. There's good rum in Jamaica, but they're nasty-smelling heaps. I've a kind of fancy for Spanish wines. There's one or two prime to the palate, and none to drink 'em save the peasants. But the more you seek the more you find, and the harsh, savage gut-rot that stabs your vitals, I could never abide it in any country."

He drank another glass of brandy, and I seemed to see at a bound the color jump into his distempered face. It swung back into his cheeks, and his blood-shot eyes beamed on me.

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"I feel better for that," he said, genially; "and I could do with some food, too."

"You shall have some directly," I answered. "It is preparing now. But see here, Captain Sercombe, I must warn you that you are in danger. Perhaps you know it?"

"Danger!" he echoed, and appeared to start in his chair. I could see that the man's nerve was altogether broken.

"Yes; the police have a warrant out for you," I answered.

"A warrant!" he murmured.

"Yes," said I; "something to do with Williams, I believe."

Sercombe's head dropped on his knee. "I see it now," he muttered. "That was his game." He looked up at me, and curled his mustache with his fingers, while a smile crept over his face and showed his large teeth.

"Well, I fancy, Mr. Greatorex, that I've come from greater danger than that. I can't quite count the police. Oh, Lord, no!" and he laughed a little.

"They are outside, keeping guard upon the castle," I explained, and I moved to the window and looked out. "I cannot think how you escaped them."

"What! are you too in disgrace?" laughed Sercombe, in his old fashion; then, more quietly, "I tell you, I'm not afraid of the police. What have I done? I defy them to pin a suspicion on me. I know to whom I owe this, and make no bones about it. I don't forget. I might have seen it coming—perhaps I did. But that didn't trouble me." He paused. "Mr. Greatorex," he pursued, in his amiable voice, "you have given me safe harborage; and I can tell you I wanted it. I came straight to you. I thank you for it. You're not the sort of man I could get on with. You keep

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your nose too jealously to the wind. You scent scruples. But that's not the point. I respect your capacities, and I am now in your debt."

"I should be wiser, Captain Sercombe, if I knew where this led," said I.

He pondered, eying me. "Sir, I will tell you presently. If I may have that food you spoke of, I think I shall be in a better way to talk with you."

At that moment the gong sounded in the hall.

"You have your answer," I replied. "We are just going to dine, and I hope you will give us the pleasure of your company."

He glanced at himself with a look of distaste.

"I am no figure for a dinner-table," said he, and a vicious expression knit his eyebrows close upon his eyes.

You may easily imagine the amazement with which my two companions received this strange visitant. He was certainly the last person we had expected to be entertaining in an amicable fashion. But neither interfered with any questions—Montgomery out of dogged loyalty to myself, and Sheppard out of a reasoning intelligence. He supposed that something was afoot, though he could not have supposed that I knew as little as himself. Sercombe had by this time regained much of his characteristic temperament. He looked out on life with his own eyes once more. But yet he showed certain signs of discomposure, more particularly in the way in which he hurried through his food, and the capacious appetite he showed for wine.

"I'm mighty empty," he explained. "I've had a long tramp." But he ventured no further communication on that subject at the time. Presently, however, he put down his knife and fork, and broke out unexpectedly.

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"Mr. Greatorex, in the Swan, some time ago, you made me a proposal."

"I did," said I.

"A little later I approached you with a counter proposal."

"Approached is the word," I said, dryly.

"Very well," said he, looking cheerfully about the company, "can't we make the basis of an agreement still?"

"I think that is quite practicable," I answered. "We might make a basis, but the question is, should we keep to it?"

Sercombe studied his glass. "I understand you," he said. "I take you. But I admit to you that things are changed since then—changed, I will impress upon you, with you as well as with me."

I bowed; the others sat silent, waiting with interest what might be forthcoming.

"Once before we tabled our cards, Mr. Greatorex," said Sercombe. "I think it would be wise if we were to do so again."

"I understand you to hold all the trumps," said I.

"Ah!" said he, "that's the rub. I don't say no. But what I wish to put to you is this: What is it worth to you if I can lay your hands on that treasure?"

"I think this was the problem I was confronted with at The Woodman, Captain Sercombe," I replied.

"It was," said he; "and then I put a price on myself, which was share and share with your party."

I considered his statement. Sheppard's eyes telegraphed at me across the table. What in the world had brought us to this pass? It was not Sercombe's tardy repentance, nor was it an heroic act of generosity, offered out of friendliness. No; the split I had anticipated had come about—the thieves had fallen

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out ; and I now began to put a point on Sercombe's condition and Sercombe's visit. Dawn broke in that little corner of my mind. And if this were so, and the partners had quarrelled, I felt that we stood to gain a great deal.

"I remember, you asked a high price," I said. "You rated your conversion—let us say—very highly."

"I did," he said, easily, "and I do now. I ask you, is your case any better? Indeed, I think it is a good deal worse, and you know well enough that if you make no terms with me you will not see a gold-piece of that hoard this side of judgment-day. I am being frank with you."

"I thank you for your frankness," I answered; "and I am equally open with you when I remind you that if you make no terms with us you have as little chance of that same hoard as ourselves."

I must say that I spoke quite at a venture, and, as I believe, somewhat out of a mere sense of repartee, which this inversion seemed to promise me. But the answer took him greatly aback, and he started, playing uneasily with his fork. But he recovered as quickly as was his wont, and laughed.

"Very well, sir," he said, cheerily. "Then isn't it obvious to you that we should find a compromise?"

"I agree," I said, "and upon these terms only—that you stand in to take your part—a quarter and no more."

He struck out his hand, as if he were presenting a pistol.

"Done!" he said, and there was a note of satisfaction in his voice. "And, gentlemen, if I needed witnesses, here are you three."

The note of eagerness in his usually equable tones surprised me, and I know all of us were agog with excitement to learn the meaning of this curious piece of

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treachery. But as there could be no doubt now as to our right to enlightenment, since we were all committed to a common cause, I put the question bluntly.

Sercombe poured himself a glass of wine.

"What is the time?" he asked, and, holding up a dangling chain before us, without a watch, grinned unpleasantly and with significance. "All right ; sit down. If you will offer me a brandy instead of this wine, Mr. Greator, I will give you your answer. It's all you want, by thunder, and it's a damned sight too much for me! I'm not a man of bad nerves, but, by God, I've split on Hood! You may bet your life on that." And his face purpled to his very eyes, which, shot with blood, gleamed savagely upon the assembly from that head rolling upon the great shoulders.

And here I set down the story that Sercombe had to tell, as nearly as may be in the words in which he told us that evening as we sat round the table.

CHAPTER XX

SERCOMBE TELLS HIS STORY

"You will remember," said Sercombe, "that the last time I saw you was when we rode back to The Woodman with that cart before us. You know well enough what was there. Well, I didn't even inquire if you had looked. But I guess I know a smart man when I see him, and, Mr. Greator, I took off my hat to you on that same occasion—the more particularly as you served me to a nicety. I was near done on that event; as close a shave it was as I have ever seen. I thought I had my eyes sharply set in my head, and I think I have; but Mister Hood needs four eyes on him, and one in the middle besides. He had me in the half-light, and I found he meant to bolt for it. We got those trinkets out by the passage, and a nasty job it was. I don't envy the pioneer of an underground gallery like that. And if it's any interest to you now, you may know that we deposited it in the cellars—the safest place when my Greeks were about. See here," and once more he tossed the dangling chain in our faces.

"Well, Hood nearly got away that time, and if he had we might have whistled for him long enough. It isn't as if I didn't know the man. He was valet to me ten years back. I took him through Chile, and we were together in the Italian trouble. That's how he got the notion of using me. We've been in some tight corners before, but I never saw him at his worst

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till now. Hood's a gem ; he's a special creation. By thunder, gentlemen, your notion of Hood is that of a month-old child's ! I know him, and I wish to know no more of his kidney. Well, no use to dwell on that. You'll see I had reason."

"One thing, captain," I interposed. "How 'did Hood know of the treasure?"

"Know?" said Sercombe. "Why, he wouldn't be a day in Jerusalem without smelling out some mystery. He has a nose like a pointer's. I conceive the old gentleman let it out. Not that he would know it—oh no. But a wink is as good as a whole chapter with Hood. Mind you, I give the devil his due, and devil is the word where Hood comes in. How did he know? He routed out a page of the old gentleman's diary. And Hood's way is not to leave to others what he can take for himself. I tell you that he hung on to the old chap day by day, until it got too hot for him, and he was sacked. But even then old Kesteven kept his tongue quiet. It wasn't to his interest to speak the truth ; and Hood and he, as I understood, were as civil as oranges. Mr. Greatorrex can tell you. But then came that affair of the paper ; and if it hadn't been for your sharp ears, Mr. Greatorrex, he'd have got what he wanted, even if he had had to stab the old man to his reins. But that failure threw him back, and that was when he wrote to me and I beat up the Greeks. But that's ancient history. Where was I?"

"Yes ; well, Hood fetched the cart up at the inn, and there was that mess about the servant, poor devil ! This confounded me, but Hood saw the advantage, and, you being taken up with the crowd, whipped off his nag. By and by he comes down upon me and gives me the tip, and Stamboulos and I got away with the booty. If I say that I would have served him as he had tried to serve me, there's no one

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will blame me. But the fact was he had got over my Greeks. That was the pinch."

Sercombe paused and sipped his brandy. His tongue wagged garrulously, as he had already drunk a great deal, and that mainly upon an empty stomach.

"We got away through the forest, and came by a place with a cavern, where the Greeks were in hiding. There we stowed cart and all. It was a snug hole, but I've never yet fathomed the hold that Hood had over those beasts, that they let the stuff alone. But they did, and that's one to the man, boot-black, valet, and cutthroat, as he is. In that hole we lay for a day or two, and the news came that the police were out; but I imagined it was the Greeks they wanted, not me. Not that I should have minded. Finally, the morning before this, up popped Hood about three o'clock, when all were asleep, and tapped me on the shoulder. I sleep pretty lightly, and I was out and talking with him in a minute or two.

"‘This wood's safer than I thought,’ he said. ‘We can move when we like. I have filled Jones with stories, and we can make a bold stroke, now that the castle is quiet. They've had enough for a time, I think; and, what with the police, they'll have enough to do to look after themselves, as I have arranged it. Can you sail a boat?’ said he.

"‘A little,’ said I, ‘as you ought to know.’

"‘Yes, sir, I forgot,’ said he, falling unconsciously into the old habit of a servant. ‘Well, suppose we rush for it, now all's clear?’

"‘What's your game?’ I asked.

"‘I've got a boat down by the Ray,’ he said, ‘and we can make for the channel.’

"‘Well, it sounds good,’ I replied, ‘though it's risky. But the Greeks are all sailors, and we can manage at a shift.’

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"At that he looked rather strangely at me, and was silent. He moved off a bit, and peeped into the cavern through the bushes. Then he came back. 'They sleep pretty sound,' he said, and again gave me an odd glance.

"'What is it?' I asked, for I knew his ways, and that there must be something underneath.

"'The Greeks are a nuisance,' he observed, watching me; 'we can do well enough without them.'

"I thought I began to see now, and said I, 'I am not in much need of them myself. But how can we give them the slip? We can't fetch out the cart and harness and get away without waking the whole brood.'

"'No,' said he, softly, 'I wasn't thinking of that.'

"'Well, let's have it,' said I.

"He stared at me a moment. 'We don't want any evidence against us, and we don't want partners,' he said.

"'We don't,' I agreed.

"'There's another way out,' he said, with his furtive eyes upon me.

"Suddenly the whole damnable business flashed upon me. By God, sirs, what do you suppose he was proposing? Nothing less than the murder of those poor devils as they lay in their sleep. You think I judged too quickly. Wait a bit. The thing came upon me in an illumination. I believe it was his eyes that did it. But I said nothing of what I felt; what I said was this:

"'There's no other way out, that I can see; and if there was another way I wouldn't take it;' and I looked at him very closely, so that he should see what I meant. He dropped his eyes.

"'All right,' he said. 'You'd better go and lie down. I'll try and think it out.'

"I went, for I was pretty sleepy; and, besides, I

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thought I had disposed of that worm in his head. And presently I got to sleep. But it couldn't have been for long, for I was awake by some sound in the night, and sat up. The Greeks were snoring about me; but somewhere I could hear a regular noise, struck at intervals, and coming from a little way off. It was still dark, but I guided my steps to the sound, and what do you think I found? Mr. Greatorrex, gentlemen, it has a nasty sound, and might very well go for a lie in another man's mouth."

Sercombe took a sip from his glass. "I struck a match, and there were some feet of earth piled just in front of me, and below that a man digging—digging, with his head at the level of my feet. What was that digging, digging for? He started at my light, and uttered an exclamation, and then stopped, with his eyes just above the soil, looking at me. We watched one another till the light went out. Then I stepped forward and grabbed his neck.

"By the Lord!" I cried, 'I am in two minds to throttle you, and make this place a grave for yourself'—and, by George! I would have done it for two pins. He wriggled in my grasp, and I jerked him up and landed him on the surface.

"Look here, Hood," said I, releasing him; 'I've known your bad qualities for ten years, and I've seen you do things that beat most things I've seen; but, by God! I haven't come to this, nor you won't, while I'm by.'

"Very well," said he, like a lamb; 'I'll fill it in;' and he never said another word.

"I went back to the cave, but this time I was not going to sleep, for I would not trust that black devil any more than Beelzebub. It was then getting gray about the tops of the forest, and the ragged edges of the trees showed against the sky. A little after I took

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a sleepy fit on me, but I fought against it tooth and nail. I sat up, with my back to the rock, and looked out of that window, as you might call it, at the growing light. Of Hood I got no sign; and there I sat and yawned and swore and pinched myself to keep my eyes open, until one by one the Greeks stirred about me, kicked their legs, and opened their eyes. Then I knew that my vigil was over, and when Stamboulos got up, shook himself, and went outside to look at the morning, I reckon I fell asleep.

"I slept very heavily for an hour or two, for when I awoke the sun stood high in the heavens. But not a sign of living human creatures was there about me. I sat up sharply, thinking that Hood had played the trick upon me, as I had thought of playing it on the Greeks. But no, there was the cart right enough, and the nag munching his oats. So up I got, wondering where the devil they all where—and I issued out of the mouth of the cave. As I came forth, my eyes fell on a group of them standing together in close conference just before the cavern; but there was no Hood. I went up to Stamboulos, the very man I had with me in the Ionian Islands, and to my amazement he turned sharply away.

"'Hulloa, sonny!' said I in surprise, but without reply they all vanished into the wood, and left me staring after them with a mouth wide open. What had come to them? I asked myself, and gaped for an answer.

"Well, you'll say that that was odd, and it was odd, seeing that the brutes were mine, and I had brought 'em across from the Pool, and one or two had been old acquaintances. And more, by token, I had saved their lives, the life of every jack man of them. Well, there was odder to come.

"I thought I was bewitched. There was still no

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Hood, and presently I sat down to breakfast, and the Greeks returned and grouped together a little way off. But when I approached they sat silent, and gave me no answer, till, getting beyond toleration, I seized two and cracked their heads together. But, upon that, up leaped one of the scoundrels and drew his knife on me. I stepped back, but Stamboulos—a dirty thief—took him by the arm and whispered in his ear, and there were noddings all round the party.

“By this time, as you may guess, I was in a devil of a huff, and off I strode into the wood, whistling, to show my indifference. It was silly, no doubt, but I did not want a pack of skunks like that to imagine I was worrying about them. Just as I had got a dozen yards or so, I heard some one come into the forest after me, and, turning, caught sight of a man named Demetrios. What are you after? thought I. But I paid no attention, and kept on. I kept straight ahead, for the wood was very thick there, and there was no one about. I only wanted to get away for a spell and consider the position. But after a bit I pulled up and took a seat on a patch of heather where the ground was more open. The morning sky shone on the bushes and worked into the corners of the forest. And as I sat there, in a meditative way, I heard sounds coming nearer, and presently Demetrios pops his head out of a bit of shrubbery and glances at me. Immediately after some one approached upon the other side, and I caught a glimpse of another of the gang poking his ugly phiz from behind a tree. And then, again, I found a third to the left. This set me up right awake, and I asked myself what it meant. You can’t wonder if I could not make it out. Could you have tumbled to it? Well, I didn’t; not just then. But, for all that, it made me angry. I rose, and ran at Demetrios with the express idea of kicking

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him, but, retreating, he slipped out a knife and snarled at me like an angry dog; and at the same time his fellows drew up to support him. I had come out without a weapon, and I was at a disadvantage. But by this time it seemed to me to be growing serious, and so I made off back towards the cave. The beggars followed me.

"When I got near the cave, there is a track that runs hard by, winding somewhere over to the western valleys, but unfrequented. 'I will take a walk here,' I said to myself, and accordingly I turned off. But at that motion of mine there was a sort of scrambling among the undergrowth, and three of the cutthroats barred my path, each showing an ugly knife. 'Very well,' thought I, 'I don't know yet what you're up to, but I'll warrant I find out, and meanwhile I'll see that I'm on a little better footing in the matter of arms.' I got back to the cavern, where the two remaining scoundrels sat tossing coins, and I went in. My revolvers had been removed, and there was not so much as even a pocket-knife left to me.

"You will conceive now that I began to be scared. What was the issue of all this? I moved down towards the slope, and two beasts got in my way and grinned at me. I turned back and tried another route, but there I was confronted by two more. By God! I tell you that it dawned on me then that it was plain black murder they meant!"

Sercombe paused again and refreshed himself, casting a glance at us, in which I thought I detected a look of fear renewed from his experiences.

"Perhaps you say," he went on in a slow voice, "that I might have cut and run for it. That thought occurred to me, but I put it off. I thought this was a damnable mistake on their part which I could explain. Anyhow, I thought, they're taking no active

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proceedings. They want to pen me up, that's all; and the morning was wearing on, and, to say the truth, I thought I'd argue it out and have some food. But I soon found that, for any arguments I had, I might as well have talked to the wind. To begin with, only two of them understood more than a sailor's English, and of these Stamboulos merely grinned by way of reply, while the other paid no heed. What Hood had said to them I don't know. He had pretty well alienated them from me before this—and they were only the scum of the earth to begin with—but up to now they had proved pacific. I guess he poured some poison into their ears. That dirty Levantine breed is superstitious. Perhaps I was supposed to have the evil eye. But more probably it was filthy greed that was at the bottom of it. Anyhow, I could not come to terms with them. And so I sat in my place, with my back against a ledge of rock, and whistled. 'All right,' I said, 'I'll dine on it.'

"It may have been an hour or two later when they prepared a meal for themselves. Up to this it hadn't occurred to me to wonder where *my* food was coming from. But just as this notion came on me I saw Stamboulos, who was the worst of the lot, approaching with a dish in his hand.

"'Come, this looks better,' said I. 'They're only playing it down on me, after all.'

"He came to a halt a yard away, and, grinning all over his face, offered me the dish. I was pretty hungry by this time, but there was that in his grin which made me sit up. I fixed my eyes on him.

"'You're a nice sort of scoundrel,' I said. For answer he grinned wider than ever out of his black mug, and, slowly drawing a paper from his pocket, emptied a yellow sort of powder deliberately over the dish.

"I believe I turned white; at least, I know I felt it.

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That notion had never entered my mind. But the vermin set down the dish before me, and returned to his companions, who greeted him with laughter. Sick-ness wasn't the word for what I felt. I kicked the dish away and stood up, a fury yelling in my belly. I was not going to wait. This last straw tickled me into action. I ran down the slope towards the track, but, quick as I was, there were three of the devils after me, and I am not so fleet as I was once. One of them came up with me, and jabbed his knife at me. I got him in the head with my fist, and down he went. But before I could recover I got a push in the back, and when I pulled myself up there were two long blades gleaming in my eyes. To go farther would have been to impale myself on a bayonet, and I drew off and backed slowly to the rock again. Here I sat down, and for the first time I was *afraid*.

"Gentlemen, I will not go through the series. For the time gets on, and I've work to do, with your help. But take that for a sample. That was one. Well, you can multiply that by a dozen. I sat at my post till dark, without food, of course, and then in a sort of blind despair of the darkness I gathered some big stones about me. I could use them, and break some egg-shells if nothing more. And a little after that night fell.

"I tell you, sirs," said Sercombe, in a husky voice, "I don't want the horrors of that night—no, not as long as I live. And, what's more, I don't want any man, save one, to pass such a night as that. There were things that crept up my brain that night. I confess to you that I know what D. T. means. I've seen a bit in my life. But to sit still and have that game in one's head till the maggots worm about there, and . . . I got one with a stone—at least, I think so. That was good—damned good.

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"I saw the dawn rise in a crimson glory. It fell over the cavern and got at the bushes about me. Then it crept on and advanced over the drunken Greeks. My God, sirs, there they lay, and I never knew it! With that hell in my soul, and that great fear of death roasting out my nerves, I had lived through a carouse. I saw them every minute of the night. They had their orders. I knew that well enough. I can hear Hood at it, with his low and humble voice:

"'Let me find him rotten when I come back.' I know the man, I say. What did he do in Aconcagua? What was that business in the environs of Peru? That set my hair on end. Yes, I heard his voice every moment of that night—last night, Mr. Greatorex. And all the while the swine lay drunk or numbed. I would to God I had let him bury them.

"See here, gentlemen, I came in an hour ago. I had had no food for thirty-six hours. I have been hunted like no human being for all that time. I was without a weapon. I had no means to call for aid. I was the subject-matter of their knives, as plain as if I was a post-mortem. I already stunk in my own imagination, I—"

Sercombe's breath fell short, and he gathered it in with a gasp; he lifted the glass to his lips and sucked in the spirit greedily. Then he resumed more equably:

"You will see that this could not go on, gentlemen. I decided that morning to run upon the knives, if I could do no more. At the first sign of my stirring Stamboulos was by me, with his 'kris.'

"'All right,' I stammered, 'finish me;,' for I was as weak as a cat and all a-sweat.

"He laughed and went away, shaking another man by the shoulders.

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"I lived through that day, somehow. But it was not so bad as the night—no, not by a long way. All the while I was snarling like a tiger prepared for a spring. And spring I did. Look here.

"In the afternoon—I guess it at four o'clock—I started out. They took me to be too weak, I think. The Levantine is as cruel a creature as God made. He loves blood; but I believe if he is educated to know starvation is worse, he will choose starvation. Stamboulos chose starvation, I take it. I starved. That was a good joke to them, as they waited for the end of me and the coming of Hood. They were safe enough, perched in that high hollow. . . . But I started out. I ran down and gained the track. Then, of a sudden, I thought they could catch me in the open track, and I jumped off into the forest.

"They were after me; oh yes, smart enough. The lot of them, I think. But I sped through the growth like a tough. I was a hare, I tell you. I was upon a cinder track—that was how I felt. I heard nothing, and saw little; but presently something clutched me, and on the instant I turned. There was nothing could stop me now. I got him and his neck in my hands, and I pulled and squeezed. I should have knuckled the soul and the life out of him, but I had no weapon. He raised his hand. I saw his knife. It got me somewhere."

Sercombe raised his coat, and a black stain showed on his shirt.

"But I held on and I choked harder. Then I heard other voices. I think I was supersensitive just then. It ran over me suddenly that the game was up. 'All right, knife me,' I thought; and the black brute did. It struck my shoulder-blade, and I dropped my hands off him and lay still."

He ceased; we drew our breaths deeply.

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"I knew I was done," he said. "I wanted no bother. I lay quiet. Then I was conscious that he was off me and stood there looking down.

"Presently there were some feet close by my head, and through my half-open eyes I saw there was another of 'em, and he was looking down. I didn't care, but I must have gone off about that time; for when I looked up again there was no one there, and I felt stiff and faint and sick in my stomach."

CHAPTER XXI

WE START UPON OUR LAST EXPEDITION

SERCOMBE came to a pause. "That's all, gentlemen," he said. "I made tracks for the castle then. I don't know how far it was, but I covered the distance as fast as I could. You see, I was afraid. I was left for dead—dead I was to those two brigands; and dead I am reported to Mr. Hood. That's all right. I don't regret it. It gives me a chance. I've got my hand in now, and, by thunder, I'll keep it!"

He ceased, and fell back in his chair, while a silence held us for some seconds. Then Sheppard rose, and, a brightness shining in his eyes, put out his hand in his impulsive way. "Captain," said he, "you've blotted out a good many points by this story, and I don't hesitate to say so on my own behalf."

Sercombe accepted his hand and laughed. "The trouble is, Mr. Sheppard," said he, "that I had to strike the bargain not with you, but with Mr. Greatorex. I wish I'd known your feelings before."

I think we all laughed at that sally, which served to put us at our ease; and I followed it up with a phrase sufficiently complimentary; and then—

"Are you all right?" I asked. "What about this wound?"

He rose from his seat. "I pay no heed to trifles when I'm on real business," he declared. "You must remember that it was mainly exhaustion that did for me, and, thanks to the wine and the good meal and

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the brandy, I'm another man. I'm not cat's meat yet, and I fancy I'll see other people out before I am," he ended, significantly.

"Very well," said I; "and now your plans?"

He looked at the clock. "High time, too," he exclaimed. "To-night, I know, was the time fixed, but what hour I didn't hear. I guess about dark. The place I can find with your aid. Isn't there a stream that runs south of these hills into the Ray?"

"There is the stream behind us," I answered. "I believe that wanders out below the town, but I've never traced it."

"That will be it—a mile this side of the river itself. We can follow the course; and the sooner the better. Are we ready?"

"Ready this moment," I answered, looking at Sheppard and Montgomery, who nodded.

"Then let us get away."

We turned to leave the room, when I suddenly recalled what we had all forgotten in the excitement of the narrative and this precipitate plan of campaign.

"Good heavens! What about the police? They will be watching for you."

Sercombe frowned. "This is nasty," he said, sitting down again. "You are right. Will they take me?"

"They have a warrant," I replied.

"Yes, yes; true. Well, we must dodge them. I reckon the castle can do that if the castle can stand a siege," he said, smiling.

As we were considering, Sercombe still with his smile upon his face, and the rest of us about the room, Sheppard leaning upon the back of a chair, there came a knock at the door. We all started, but, recollecting that it could be no more than Mrs. Main, I answered to the rap. Mrs. Main it was; but,

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after all, there was some reason in our start of uneasiness.

"Mr. Jones, sir, wishes to see you," said she.

A look passed round the assembly. "It seems that we are anticipated," remarked Sercombe, pleasantly.

"Did he ask who was here?" I inquired.

"No, sir ; he said he would like to see you."

"Very well," I answered, slowly, "show him into the library ;" and when Mrs. Main was gone I said, "This brings the matter to a point. Jones is here after you, captain. His men were watching."

"That's so," said Sercombe, easily, and picking a cigar from Sheppard's case. "But I don't see how it need excite us."

"You forget that I must see him," I responded, impatiently.

"I don't," he replied ; "but I have a high opinion of the resources of the castle."

"Of course," put in Sheppard, "there's the outlet from the treasure-chamber."

"Now we're getting at it," said Sercombe, easily.

"And the only path to that is by way of the guard-room, and as like as not Jones's men are without," I retorted.

"There's my room with the secret staircase," interrupted Montgomery.

We looked at him. "By Jove!" said Sheppard.

"You're right," I said.

"Boy," said Sercombe, in his friendly way, "I served you a shabby trick one day. But you're a white man."

"Oh, I don't do it for you," quoth Montgomery, in a lordly manner.

Sercombe laughed. "As long as you do it—" he said, and left his sentence unfinished.

With that I went off to visit Jones, whom I found

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in a most portentous mood, and with his infernal notebook to hand.

"I have reason to believe, sir," said he, coldly, and in his best official voice, "that a man for whom I have a warrant out is harbored in the castle."

"Ah!" said I, coolly, "and who might that be, sergeant?"

"One Captain Sercombe, sir, seen entering the castle an hour or so back by Constable Buckle."

"You seem very well posted in the affairs of my house," I answered, and lit a cigarette. "Perhaps you will be good enough to find him," and I turned on my heel. I felt that this was the only way in which to take my friend Jones's official impertinences. He reckoned us for Sercombe's companions; the captain *had* been seen to enter, and I had no defence save to leave the police sergeant to his own devices.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said; "I have your leave to search the castle?"

"Every inch of it," I answered, indifferently. "How long do you propose to take—a fortnight?"

Jones coughed. "If you will give me your word of honor, sir, that Captain Sercombe is not within the castle—" he began.

"I will give you nothing, not even a compliment on your imagined smartness," I interrupted, sharply. "You are as blind as a bat, and I will leave you to stumble about in your own way. But one thing I will not have, and that is your men trespassing on my premises, as they did an hour or so ago. If you have business, have business; but if I find any one hanging about the copses, I will take my own way with him."

Jones started at my angry rejoinder, and he appeared a little embarrassed.

"You have your remedy, sir," he said. But I made

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no answer, merely moving to the door. "I will take your word for it, sir," he repeated.

"I have not given it," I said.

"Well, sir," said Jones, "I bid you good-evening."

I knew well enough that the prospect of that interminable search had made him wince. It would be folly for him to undertake it; and so he withdrew with this slight discharge of courtesies. But I had a notion that the Welsh blood in him was too mulish to give in—and it was certainly as well that Sercombe had gone by a private route.

Sheppard met me with the news. Montgomery had undertaken the job of guiding the captain through the gallery, and after that Sercombe was to conduct him to the rendezvous on the river. He had given Sheppard particulars of the place, and it did not appear as if we could miss it. But time was passing, and if anything was to be accomplished we must be away. Our preparations were accordingly pushed forward, nor were they very elaborate. An encounter—maybe a bloody one—might be looked for; certainly we could not afford to dispense with our weapons. But beyond them there was little to delay or encumber us.

Sheppard and I got forth of the castle, and reached the great gates just after dark was fallen. As we passed through I thought I perceived the black shadow of a man hovering among the bushes near by, and I put him down to Jones. A shrill whistle rose on the night at the same time, but at the moment I paid no heed to what was evidently a signal between Jones and his man. But a little way down the hill the sergeant himself waylaid us, and, standing in the very centre of the road, flashed a bull's-eye in our faces.

I started, and gave an exclamation to the winds in my alarm.

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"Beg your pardon, gentlemen," said Jones ; "I can't afford to make a mistake, and must be quite certain."

I felt extremely angry, and I strode on without a word, fearing indeed to say anything lest I should go too far. Jones's eyes travelled after us as he swung round upon his heels, and I remember noticing vaguely that his gaze was fastened upon my breast pocket, whence, as I afterwards found, the butt of a revolver protruded.

"Let's push on," I said to Sheppard, and we took the descent into the valley at a rattling speed.

At the foot of the gorge we turned, and, following the road to the right for a quarter of a mile, dipped quickly with the bend of the brook eastward and for the border of the farther county. The stream, which at this lower level took the drainage of the whole valley, and was quickened by many rivulets, swelled gradually to a respectable body of water. The first part of the way took us through the outlying stretches of the forest, but presently the woods hugged the margins upon either side, and behind was open country, broken into fields and pastures, with here and there the shining windows of a farm-house or cottage. About this point it occurred to Sheppard that we were being followed.

"I saw a man cross from that last stile," he declared, "and I'll swear I heard a rustling in the bushes."

"Very well," said I ; "if Jones is after us, Jones will have a long tramp, and the sooner we despatch him on it the better."

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Sit tight," said I, "and keep mum. Here's an excellent corner for silent meditation." And I dropped into a black patch of bracken, whither he followed me.

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We had been following a foot-path which wound through the coppice close to the stream ; and a little distance to the left we sank into our hiding-place and waited. Some five minutes after, the footsteps of a man sounded softly behind us, and he came into the plane of sight. Dark as it was I made him out for one of Jones's men, and my opinion was confirmed by the stealthy manner in which he proceeded.

"We'll let him pass," I whispered, "and then follow *him*. Rustic police are no harm to us."

Five minutes later we emerged and resumed our journey, diligently opening our ears to the sounds of the night. But nothing was audible to alarm us, and we reached at last a spot where the path ran down to the water's edge between thick trees. Opposite the dark bulk of a little jetty was just discernible, and beyond that the lights of a house.

"This is the place," said Sheppard. "But I see no signs of the others. Yet they must have got here before us."

"Let us wait," I suggested ; "and meanwhile we are better in hiding."

We concealed ourselves among the trees, and passed ten minutes in some anxiety. Was it possible, I asked myself, that Montgomery and Sercombe had already encountered Hood and his scoundrels, with a tragic result ? Or, again, had Jones happened upon them and taken Sercombe ? Perhaps even the captain had been dealing treacherously with us all through.

But these speculations were scattered at the approach of voices and a noise of oars in the water, which here ran deep and wide, a mile from its junction with the Ray. We listened with increased excitement, but as yet nothing was visible in the darkness. The boat seemed to draw up at the foot of the path below us, and there was the noise of two people landing.

SERCOMBE STOOD THERE WITH A MAN AT HIS FEET!



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"It's all right," I whispered to Sheppard. "Here they are."

And I was on the point of jumping up, when I heard a new sound opposite, and a figure rose and stood in the pathway. As we strained our eyes to make out what this might be, I heard the approaching feet of the others. Then somewhere out of the night these words floated to us: "Captain Sercombe, I arrest you in the name of the Queen."

There was a violent exclamation and the noise of a struggle, and afterwards a short cry and a horrid crack.

Sheppard and I leaped to our feet and reached the path, where, ten paces from the water, stood Sercombe, and at his feet a prostrate figure.

"What the devil is this?" I said, anxiously.

"Oh, you there, gentlemen?" said Sercombe, puffing. "This damned knave would have ruined our whole venture. But I reckon I've given him his stomach full."

"Yes, you have," I said, bitterly, bending over the man. "He's about done for."

"Pooh!" said Sercombe. "Only struck his head on a log. He's all right. Don't waste time over such swine," and he made for the boat, where I could perceive Montgomery.

I stopped him. "Understand this, Captain Sercombe," I said, "I am not here to break innocent heads or to imperil honest lives. And if, as you say and I hope, this poor man is not dead, I will have him taken where he can be cared for."

Sercombe laughed harshly. "You are so infernally particular, Mr. Greatorex. But have your way. The man would recover in half an hour. But you're directing this expedition, I suppose."

"Very well," said I; "then I will take him over to the house yonder."

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We carried the unfortunate man aboard the boat, and pushed her off, Montgomery punting to the jetty. There we landed the body. Suddenly Sercombe stopped.

"This is my affair," he said, "not yours. You won't be able to show your faces after this, if you're mixed up in it. Besides, I may get definite particulars as to Hood if I go up."

He shouldered the unconscious form of the policeman as he spoke, and departed, staggering under his burden. In a little he came back.

"It's all right," he said, easily. "I told the farmer that it was a friend of mine who had met with an accident, and he has promised to look after him till I return. I am to call in an hour's time." He laughed. "And I've found out that Hood left half an hour ago, having borrowed the old gentleman's boat. There's some good in charity, after all," and once more he laughed.

I was about to make some impatient rejoinder, for the man's callousness irritated me, but he seemed to stumble, and pressed against me as he got into the boat; and the eye of the window falling on his face, I saw it was deathly pale.

"Sit down quietly," I said; "you've overdone it. You must remember your wound."

"Curse my wound!" he exclaimed, savagely. "Pull ahead, boys!" and at the word Montgomery and Shepard bent to the oars, and the nose of the boat shot down stream.

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY

"AND now," said I to Montgomery, "please explain. I think we none of us contemplated a boating expedition. Where are we?"

"Hood's got on before us, you know," he explained, eagerly. "Captain Sercombe and I got away safely, and reached this ferry without any trouble some twenty minutes before you. But the boat had gone!"

"You mean Hood's boat?" I asked.

Sercombe applied a flask to his lips, and then sat up.

"That's it," he broke in. "I reckoned we might nab Hood in the act, but we came too late by ten minutes. I recognized the place from his description. For the matter of that, it's easy to find. But there was no boat. That meant we must carry the expedition a stage farther ere we could drop on him. Presently Montgomery and I happened upon this tub a bit lower down. She's no great shakes, but she'll do to come up with him."

"And when we do?" said Sheppard.

"I don't want to put too fine a point on it, sir," said Sercombe, "but it means cutting out, and if we are not prepared for cutting out, why, we had best turn the nose of the boat up stream again."

There was silence after this, but Sheppard and Montgomery applied their oars if anything a trifle more smartly.

"We're not going to turn back now, if that's your

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meaning, captain," I said, at last. "We only want to understand where we are and what we have to expect."

"I think, Mr. Greatorex, that you may expect treasure," said Sercombe, with a laugh. "I respect your scruples. Don't misunderstand me. You shall know all I know. You were always a damned careful person, but I never knew an over-cautious man yet that was not overreached. You don't mind my criticisms? They're meant with no offence. But about the business. Hood's got a load aboard, and he's no thought of being followed. What he's after I don't quite know, for he never got to the end of his explanations, owing to that Greek affair. But he's going down the river, that's certain; and he'll paddle none too quick, having a cargo. On the other hand, he does not want daylight on him. Hood never liked too much illumination. No; he'll make where he's bound for by night, and under the stars. Now, I dare say, you gentlemen know these parts better than I. What point do you put on it?"

"Give him six hours," I suggested, "and that will fetch us into the early morning. Montgomery, how far do you reckon a boat would get by three in the morning?"

Montgomery paused on his oar and considered, while Sheppard hung on his and idly smacked the flowing water; the stream ran faster now between open banks.

"It ought to get near to Portagree," said Montgomery, at last.

"And where may that be?" asked Sercombe.

"In the mouth of the Severn—in the estuary."

"Ah!" said Sercombe, thoughtfully. "Now I wonder what will happen then? And I should like to know what my friend Hood has got in his head."

We shot down the water again. Silence enveloped

IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY

the party, for I fancy we were all engrossed in forecasting this curious adventure. Presently I came out of my thoughts, which were unprofitable enough, and grew conscious of the night.

The sky was heavy with low bellying clouds, and scarce a breath of air stirred. We raced between the banks as it were through a wild moorland, and some scattered voices of the dark reached us. In a little, however, the scene changed, and we ran under the shadow of great trees, and everything was blotted from our sight—sky, water, and the waste places of the moor. A little after there was a jar and a shock that sent us all sprawling in the bottom of the tub.

Sercombe, who was in the bows, put out his arms.

"It's a boom," he said. "This is a piece of private water."

"We shall have to carry the boat round," said Sheppard.

"Did Hood, do you suppose?" I asked.

"No, I think not," said Sercombe. "I'd like to see the party that would carry that cargo. Yes, you're right. Where Hood's been, we can go."

"If he *has* been," said Sheppard.

Sercombe made no answer, but pulled the boat along the boom.

"It's wood," he said, "and I make no doubt but it's old and tired. Anyhow, I think Hood's dinghy went through this. I can find no break, though."

"Let us put a pace on the tub and try," I suggested.

Sercombe whistled slowly. "She's not much of a tub, I admit," he said, dubiously, "but it's all we've got."

"You are afraid of her splitting up?"

"That's so; but, anyhow, let's risk it. Drive, boys, when I give the word."

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We backed out and pulled up the stream, and I set her nose full on. "Now!" said Sercombe, and the oars struck the water together. With a sighing, groaning noise the tub dipped her snout into the water, and it hummed about her sides.

"Now!" shouted Sercombe again. I leaned forward to the stroke as though I had been coxing a racing-crew, and in the next second the blow came. She struck and staggered, recoiling and shivering in every beam. But Sercombe, in the bows, who had been almost precipitated into the stream, cried out in triumph:

"She's through; the boom's given somewhere!"

That was true, as we found out immediately, for the current bore the dinghy down once more upon the log, and with a rasping noise and a jerking movement she slipped over the obstruction.

"It's lucky that the wood was rotten," said Sercombe; "I don't believe our tub would have stood another ounce."

"I think we must thank Hood, too," I remarked.

"Oh, we'll thank him when we meet him," said Sercombe, cheerfully, "and the sooner we pay our *devoirs* the better. So let's buckle to."

In spite of our objections, Sercombe insisted upon taking a hand with me at the sculls. He professed himself quite well, said he had often suffered from the same complaint, and could stand more of it.

"A pin-prick to the way they get at your vitals in Sicily," said he. "I've stood for an hour with three small black devils jabbing at me against a door in the dark. Those Sicilians know how to use the knife. We don't; and, for all their bragging, the Greeks don't. They lack the skill—the *finesse*. Hood comes nearer the ideal. I'd chance Hood with anything but a

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knife. Where he took the trick I haven't an idea, but he's handy—oh yes, damned handy."

He certainly showed no signs of fatigue or faintness in his handling of the oars, but rowed like a sailor—a little stiffly, but with plenty of force, and we cut the water at a fine pace. Presently Sheppard, who had taken Sercombe's place in the bows, tapped me on the shoulder.

"Here's the Ray, Ned," said he.

"So much for the first stage, then," said Sercombe, who heard him, and he leaned on his oars. The current took us with a gentle wash into the bosom of the larger stream. Here the banks were higher, and clothed with a shadowy investiture of trees. Sunk as we were in that hollow within the clay walls, the nocturnal sky lowered upon us, gathered in gloom. The clouds congregated solemnly, and, to my fancy, with an aspect of sullenness. The air was still, and the sweat broke out on the rowers. We changed again, and under the fresh impulse the tub ran down the Ray.

"We may pick them up any moment, now," remarked Sercombe, and I observed him, in the stern, loosen his coat and feel in his pockets.

"The boat's leaking," said Montgomery, in my ears. I stopped rowing, and repeated his words to the others. Here was a dilemma. Sercombe paid no heed. He was staring, as I could just perceive, staring out upon the river over our heads.

"Do you see anything?" he asked. No one answered him.

"Stay on your oars!" he commanded; and I no longer recognized the soft voice of our old enemy, but something stronger and imperious. It sounded of Chili and Peru. We ceased rowing. "What do you hear?" he inquired.

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"Nothing," came from Montgomery.

"I'll trust your ears, lad," said Sercombe. "Drive on."

Montgomery's back worked to and fro with strenuous regularity before me. In the stern, with the strings of the rudder in his hand, Sercombe loomed large and dim. We were too much preoccupied for speech. Thought was current in us, and the blood streamed along the arteries of the rowers. The river opened wider, and the banks fell away on either side, sloping softly up to great black heights. And now a current from the sea came humming over the river-bar and met us, striking the tub's beak with a dull plash. She swung and twisted, groaning in her sides.

"That's the estuary," said Montgomery.

Sercombe leaned forward. "And we've not caught 'em," he said, musingly. "Hood must have had a notion. Well, you see, he was bound to push on."

Our changes had taken place with punctuality, and now I lay across the bows, and had my ear to the channel.

The wind came up and blew gently about my face. "Good," sighed Sercombe; "that's refreshing. I thought I should stifle."

Sheppard, who was a yachtsman, cast a glance over his shoulders at the black horizon, but he said nothing. The current throbbed under the belly of the boat, and she rose and fell upon the waves.

"I suppose we're out now?" asked Sercombe.

Darkness environed us, and I could see nothing forward or upon the left. A gloomy mass of shadow lay upon the right hand.

"We're hugging the right bank," I said. "I think we're in the estuary. I can see nothing."

"We'll keep her in close," said Sercombe, jerking his rudder. "That wind's coming up a bit."

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A flaw sailed out of the night and played upon us sharply. With that current drawing below her, and under the stress of the gust, she reeled and hung. Then she began slowly to creep along the water. Sercombe jammed the boat close to the shore. Then out of the abysmal darkness the wind brought a new sound to my ears.

I turned to the others. "They're in front," I murmured.

"What's that?" called Sercombe, from the stern.

I spoke louder.

"Give me the sculls," he said, leaping to his feet.

"No, no; sit down," said Sheppard. "Confound your hulking form, man. She'll fill if we give her the ha'p'orth of a chance. Keep under the lee of the shore, and we'll run her along."

"Go double, boys," urged Sercombe.

They bent to their work with zest, and the boat spun along in a lull of the wind. The sound of oars dipping in water grew clearer.

Sheppard dropped his scull. "It's all right," he declared. "We can catch them. I've no doubt of that. Let's think. What are we going to do?"

"Why, catch 'em!" cried Montgomery.

"We must strike somewhere and sometime," said I. "The question is, shall we do it now?"

Sercombe sat considering, and I think we all unconsciously were awaiting his decision. He pulled the rudder strings suddenly with resolution.

"We'll get a bit nearer, anyhow," he remarked, "and the wind will keep our news from them. But I fancy this has got to be settled on *terra firma*."

"I agree with you," I assented.

"Pull on, then," he replied, and himself prepared for action.

As Sheppard and Montgomery dipped their oars, a

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swell of the tide struck her on the broadside, whither she had fallen away. Simultaneously a capful of wind darted upon us. The tub rolled over and kicked till the gunwale lay under the water. We flung ourselves to the farther side and she righted, the sea pouring in a cataract across her bows. Her nose sank deeply in the trough, and I felt the boards slant away from me towards the stern.

"She is sinking!" said Montgomery.

"Give way, give way!" called Sheppard, sharply. "Put her head up!" And the two drove the sculls through the masses of foaming water. The dinghy took a jump forward, broadside on to the water, and under the brisk strokes of the rowers leaped a second time. Then her bows went down, and rolling her head to one side like a wounded porpoise, she sank slowly with a gurgling and a churning of water.

When I saw that a wreck was inevitable I dropped into the sea, and struck out for the shore. Three or four strokes brought me into my depth, and I stood waist-deep in the tossing waves, and looked for the others. I called to them loudly, and one by one they emerged out of the darkness of the foam. We stood together dripping on the flat shore.

"This is a good thing," was the first thing Sercombe said, as he wrung out the wet from his coat. "I said we should have to fight it out ashore. You see, we daren't have risked the treasure afloat."

There was sense in this, but it struck me comically at the time.

"They'll certainly never make for open water in that boat to-night," said Sheppard.

"We'll catch 'em at Portagree," remarked Montgomery, cheerfully.

"Well, we all seem agreed that we are in luck, and

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that nothing better could have happened to us," I said, with a laugh.

"There's one thing I'm going to do before I go a yard farther," said Sercombe, "and that is to clean my pistol and put in a fresh cartridge."

"Amen," said Montgomery.

We followed the example, and then we all set out along the margin of the estuary, running, at the first, to make up for lost time. But Hood had the tide and the wind against him, and he made way slowly, so that we soon came near enough to the boat for our purposes. The night was so thick that we could discern very little, but no one doubted that we were within striking distance of our enemy. So we kept along the shore until the lights of Portagree came into sight.

It was by now somewhere near two in the morning, and the village, which was a collection of poor cottages on that barren and exposed shore, was wrapped in sleep. Only a lamp or two shone from the windows of the houses, and some lights of the little craft riding in the road. Waste-land, scattered with furze and low-growing bushes, lay at the back of the village, and here we halted to decide upon our action.

"We have got to find out what Hood's after," I said. "He'll be in Portagree shortly. We must watch him."

"That's the only course," agreed Sercombe. "We can do nothing till we know that. And see here, this is no business for a party, but for a picket. I'll take that job myself. Give me half an hour, and I'll engage to fix the business."

To that we agreed, and the captain departed, moving cautiously towards the village, while we three threw ourselves upon the ground in our damp clothes and waited with what patience we might summon.

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It must have been fully half an hour later when I perceived Sercombe approaching. He walked quickly, and as one under excitement.

"Well?" we asked in a breath.

"I've done it," he said, "though I take back my words about *terra firma*. Hood's going to sea."

Sheppard whistled.

"I got a good post behind a cottage and spied on him. He's transferred his luggage to a yacht. By thunder, but he must have made his preparations well! I couldn't see much of the crew; but that I could see. He's got the load aboard by this time, and he's off, I reckon, ere you can say Jack Robinson."

"Then we're done," I cried.

"No, not a bit," said Sercombe, cheerfully. "I've taken French leave with a bit of a boat down yonder. Daren't stop to wake 'em up for permission, you know, Mr. Greatorex. 'Twould take too long and delay us, and make it public. We can pay coming back."

"I'll give you this credit, captain," said I, "that you're mighty prompt."

"Well, I've lived over forty years," said the captain, simply.

We did not stop to discuss the ethics of the question further, but the feeling that the time was past for argument, and that henceforward we were committed by our original decision to a certain course of action, I shoved aside sophistries and ran down to the beach. Here Sercombe had secured a lumbering and ugly boat, furnished with dipping lugs.

"It don't look very much," he whispered, "but it's the only craft sufficiently far from them to keep our movements quiet."

Sheppard stared down at it dubiously. "It's not a rig I like," he said.

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But here Montgomery pointed with his finger, seizing me by the arm. "There they go," he said.

"Then here we go," returned Sercombe, leaping into the boat.

Sure enough, in the lessening darkness I could catch sight of a blacker spot moving slowly outward. We ran up the lugs under Sheppard's direction, and the boat stood out.

"We shall have more wind," whispered Sheppard to me. "I don't think we see the end of this yet."

"I'm sure we don't," I returned, moodily. "What are we going to do now? We have played the fool, and must go on playing the fool, I suppose."

I spoke somewhat bitterly, for at that moment an interval of sanity reigned in my mind, and I seemed to see in a flash the portentous consequences of this adventure.

"Anyhow, we must go on," said Sheppard, briefly, and put up his tiller to fetch the nose of the boat about.

Even as we ceased speaking the wind came down in a roaring from the wide spaces of the Channel, and blew out our lugs till they rang like drum-heads. A great noise filled the seas, and the blocks were straining and shrieking. Sheppard was a skilled hand, and he kept his head cool. He came up to the wind as near as the abominable lugs would let him. There was no sign of the other boat.

"She'll beat down the estuary," said Sercombe, "and make for some point upon the Somersetshire coast, probably."

"No, no; he's bound for Newport," said Sheppard. "He can get away from Newport like any honest skipper. Anyway, we'll try it at that."

The gale tore at the canvas as though it would strip it in ribbons. We had a great way on, the boat scud-

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ding through the rough water with her port gunwales ripping under the foam. We got out some distance, and then he said :

"I must fetch her round ; we'll have to try a long board in this wind."

We said nothing, but I jumped to the lug. Down dropped the sail, a heavy lump of damp canvas ; and Montgomery and I hauled till we dragged it into position.

"Lord ! what a beast !" said Sheppard. He put over the tiller, and round she swung, the lugs cracking and the blocks jumping. She lurched as though she would go over, and then, the white water streaming over her bows, she started off like a hare upon her new course.

"By thunder !" said Sercombe, "she goes well !"

"Anything would go in this weather," returned Sheppard.

Sercombe laughed. "It's a good night for us," he observed.

Montgomery at this juncture raised a cry which took our eyes to him. The light was rising over the water, and a soft darkness ruled.

"I see them," he said.

Sercombe sprang forward, stumbling against the mast in his excitement, so that the boat swayed and rocked under him.

"Steady ! steady !" called Sheppard.

"You're right, by Jove !" cried the captain, from the bows. "She's there !"

Sheppard peeped under the sail. "A yawl," he said ; "and we can catch them if we want to."

Not a hundred yards separated the two boats, but it was questionable if they would see us, unless they were on the lookout for us. Certainly, in that coil of wind and water, no sound of us would reach them.

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"We've just got to hug them now," said Sheppard, "until it gets lighter."

"No, no," said Sercombe, impatiently. "Lay her alongside, and be damned to it! I want to come to terms with Mr. Hood."

Sheppard leaned to me. "What shall I do, Ned?" he asked, in a low voice.

The wind shrieked about our heads, and the estuary rolled in great hills of water. The excitement of the scene was strong upon me, mad as was the venture to which we were committed.

"Go ahead!" called Sercombe, in a loud voice. Sheppard eased her and let her run.

The yawl was creeping close-hauled on the other tack.

"We can beat her if we give the lugs their full advantage," explained Sheppard. "Close-hauled, she'll move a yard to our foot!"

So far, so good; if we had not been seen we were all right, and could come on them later with a wet sail. The wind blew sharply up the Channel, swelling into a gale. The night was flecked with bright points of light, and then they died, and a mist of rain crept down. In a little the yawl had disappeared, but by the last glimpse we had of her she was fighting up inch by inch. Sheppard ran down for some minutes, and then he jammed the tiller down, and the boat came up into the wind. The lugs flapped and rattled. Montgomery and Sercombe took the sheets. For a moment we hung in the wind, silent and motionless. It was only for a moment; in that moment Sheppard's eyes met mine. I knew what he was thinking. Even then we might have paused. And yet not so. Sercombe, in the bows, seemed possessed of a devil, roaring against the wind and the tide, and laughing aloud with diabolic delight. Montgomery's face was set

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with the lust of battle. Sheppard said no word, but his eyes returned to the leaping water. He put up the tiller slowly ; and then the lugs flew out in the wind.

"Let her go !" yelled Sercombe, from the bows.

Sheppard jammed up the tiller, and away, like a leaping tiger, sprang the lugger upon her prey. The black deeps of that greedy Channel were broken into pools and mountains. Fountains of green water spouted upon all sides, and we were plunged into drenching spray. And upon all this pomp of war and devilry the dawn broke slowly.

Before us, and still creeping up the wind, scarce two hundred paces, we made out the yawl, but the light served us no further through that gray curtain of rain. But the next moment we were aware that Hood had awakened to our neighborhood, although he could not have suspected our identity or our errand. A voice shouted something from the yawl, but we could not catch the words. Hands were gesticulating, and then a light was flashed. Sheppard kept her nose pointed grimly, and finally the yawl altered her course.

"If it comes to tacking, they'll do us," said Sheppard.

On the course we were holding, however, we outsailed the yawl by two to one. The wind took us almost astern, and we overhauled her. The figures on the yawl grew clearer, distinct against the gray light, as we rode into the trough.

"My God !" said Sercombe, suddenly, adding a great oath. "My God ! He's got but two Greeks with him ! He's done it ! I left five ! He's done it !" and staring with a dropping jaw at the yawl.

By this time we were plain to her occupants — as plain as they were to us ; and I could make out Hood

“THE TWO BOATS WERE NOW QUITE CLOSE”



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himself, standing by the big mast with one arm about it. A Greek stood near him, and one was at the helm. He stood without moving, watching us with those stealthy eyes I knew so well. The roar of the rain and wind upon the water was deafening. We descended into the trough of the waves, and when we rose, Hood stood at his post, his hand stretched forth to the Greek. The next minute he held a gun to his shoulder.

"Look out!" I sang out to the bows.

The two boats were now quite close, tossing on the same piece of water. Even through that hurly-burly the sharp report reached my ears; and at the same time Sercombe staggered and went back against the sail. It was all instantaneous. The Greek shifted his tiller, and the yawl sheered off. Montgomery pulled Sercombe up, and propped him in the bows.

"It's all right, my lad," he said, "that black devil's got me. I meant to do for him. Well, it's luck."

We gave him some brandy, and he spoke no more, breathing with difficulty.

I turned to Sheppard. "Let her away!" I cried furiously. "We'll have that bloody scoundrel or die for it."

The boat dipped her nose, and once more forged over the yawl's counter. "Keep a watch on him!" I cried.

Montgomery took his pistol from under his waistcoat. I gripped mine. I think we were all taken with the frenzy of bloodshed.

"Board her!" cried Montgomery. "Board her!" and stamped towards the gunwale.

"Lay her along!" I shouted. "Lay her along!"

Sheppard twirled his tiller, and the lugger struck the starboard quarter of the yawl with a crash. In-

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stantly Montgomery leaped, pistol in hand, upon the enemy.

At that instant a shrill scream of terror from the Greeks stayed my foot in the act to follow. I beheld Hood, with his raised arm holding a knife, his nostrils distended; but his eyes were not on me or towards the boat. They were directed across the empty, yelling sea and that gray mist of rain. These facts passed in a moment. I had an instantaneous impression of that devil with his implacable and imperturbable face, leering as it were upon me; and then I heard his shout, and his arm went up towards the sky. Montgomery had stumbled into the yawl, and his hand had knocked down the man at the helm. The yawl tossed and flapped in the heaving water. Hood leaped towards the helm. I saw him gesticulate at Montgomery, and it was only then that I looked in the direction in which his eyes were set.

Simultaneously there rose upon the gray dawn, compounded horribly with those dreadful noises of the storm, a great shrill sound, and upon our port bows loomed the black hulk of an ocean liner, making for the sea.

That was the impression of one moment. The next she was upon us, a monstrous menace of Death. Her cut-water struck the yawl amidships.

Even to this hour I have never been able to dis sever the sequences of that tragic moment. I saw the yawl part and dissolve in a mist of water; and then my next recollection was of bumping and grinding in the boat against the iron shell of the liner. Windows full of lights passed before me, and voices called—and then we were swung out again like a teetotum upon the wilderness of brawling water.

The liner sheered off into the darkness, and there

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was nothing visible. Sheppard kept the tiller hard, and we rolled and tossed together. The wind, as though its dreadful mission were fulfilled, dropped suddenly away, and we were conscious of a silence. Suddenly Sercombe's voice broke on us, startling me.

"Give me a little brandy, Greatorex."

I handed him the flask, and he set his lips to it. "Put your hand down here," he said, pointing to his breast. I did so. "That's the place. I know when I've got my dose. I was always good at that." He was silent for a moment. "I'm glad I saw the man die," he said, presently. "I was right, after all. I swore I'd see him out. But I'm sorry about the boy."

I had nothing to say, and he sank into silence again.

"There's that steamer coming back, Greatorex," he said, after a time.

I looked, and saw that he was right.

"They'll pick you up," he continued. Then, "See here; this thing's been badly managed. It's been a stomachful for all of us. But there's no need to make it worse than it is. But I'll tell you what. This gun-shot is not going to be easy for you, not by a long slice. It looks ugly, Greatorex, and that's a fact. A yawl run down—there's no harm in that. But when it comes to letting blood—why, there's sure to be questions."

The lights of the liner gleamed a hundred yards away, and a voice hailed us.

"That's gospel truth," said Sercombe, thoughtfully. "And the treasure's at the bottom of the sea, along with one good man, at any rate." Once more he was silent, and once more he resumed, speaking with difficulty: "I've got my gruel. See here; this is my affair. I'll not play Jonah in the circumstances."

He ceased, and raising himself upon an arm, looked

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towards the liner. Then, with a swift movement of his body, he pulled himself upon the gunwale and rolled off into the water.

I uttered a cry and rushed to the edge of the heaving boat. There was no sign of body, alive or dead, in that tumultuous waste of waters.

Sheppard sat trembling, with his hand on the tiller. He whimpered. The boat's head fell off and fell on, and we rocked on the disordered face of the sea.

I went over and took the tiller from his hand, and I put her nose towards the liner.

THE END

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